

The Pursuit of an Ultra Life
Loving, Running, & Listening

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by
Hunter W. Potts

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To My Wife and Kids,
You Mean The World To Me

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I would also like to thank my parents, my in-laws, and my church family for always being there when I needed you. Of course, I submit a big thank you to the race organizer RunBum Tours for creating the race in the first place and I must also give a heartfelt shoutout to the Southern Craft Creamery, a local coffee and ice-cream shop in my town whose affogatos provided the perfect fuel to keep me writing on days when my words did not flow so easily. Lastly, I want to apologize to the reader for any mistakes you encounter throughout this work. Any errors, of which I am sure there are many, rests solely on my shoulders. It is my hope that they do not detract from the overall message of the book itself.

In writing this book, I found out quickly that it was not easy to try and organize my entire life story onto paper. However, in the end, I found this process to be immensely rewarding. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. Happy Reading!

Love, Listen, & Run

Hunter W. Palla

Prologue

Driving through the serene mountains of North Georgia, I am headed to challenge my body and mind in an ultimate test of physical and mental endurance - The Cloudland Canyon Ultramarathon. Peering out my window, I observe the mystifying effects the late Autumn season has on the lush woodlands that surround me. Throngs of skyward reaching trees canvas the roadway while their slim bare trunks give way to branches that intertwine to form a dazzling rust-colored forest canopy. Blanketing the forest floor below, auburn leaves weave a calico covered quilt up the mountain side. As I turn my attention towards the road ahead, the sprawling natural beauty does little to calm my nerves for the race tomorrow. To unravel the anxious knots in my stomach, I begin to retreat into my past and find strength from the things that I have accomplished in my life. The journey to get here, to this exact moment, is one that I have found myself mulling over constantly in my preparation for the race.

Every day, I wake up with the same goal - I strive to be in the moment. To be ever mindful of my past and continually preparing for my future; doing my best to live what I have dubbed to be an "Ultra Life". Ultra, in Latin means extra, super, or beyond. In my life, the journey of this Pursuit has taken on a variety of forms, and I have found that predominantly my life is filled with stories and moments of Loving, Running & Listening. In loving, I endure to love myself, my God, the person I have committed my life to, my

family, and any others that I meet along the way. In listening, I endeavor to learn. By listening to others, I seek to understand them, where they are coming from, and aim grow from the useful knowledge that they have. And lastly, in Running, I run because running is not easy. Running is at times difficult, arduous, and disheartening but it is also at times carefree, joyful, and peaceful. Running creates instantaneous feedback, it lets me know that I am mortal, that I am not perfect, and that I can always be better.

In everything I do, I want to do it to the absolute best of my abilities. Most recently, this has been taking on the challenge of ultramarathon. In the car alone, I reflect on so many things my life has been, have wanted it to be, and the winding road that it has taken. I fully recognize that I have been gifted with opportunities and truths that I could not have had otherwise without the ability to Love, Run, and Listen. As I ascend the mountain, I draw closer to the start of the race. I do not know what tomorrow will bring or how many miles I will cover but I do know that of each those miles would not be possible without all the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that had come before.

Chapter 1

On the Road

Rolling out of bed in the early hours of a chilly foggy morning I throw on my travel clothes, pack the final items in my duffel bag, and fill a thermos full of piping hot coffee. With my checklist complete, I sneak back into my bedroom where my wife is sleeping soundly. Being careful not to wake our five-month-old newborn or our two-year-old twins, I give my wife a final parting kiss for the weekend then duck out our back door. Sliding into the driver's seat of my car, a 2010 Nissan Rogue, I punch in the coordinates for the Cloudland Canyon State Park and pull out onto the open road for what I hope will be an "ultra" weekend adventure. Although I was leaving behind my wife and kids for the weekend, I was excited to set out on the open road and begin the long trek to the race venue. My wife and I had decided early on, after signing up for the race, that taking our kids on a 6-hour plus drive on back-to-back days was not our idea of a fun family getaway.

On the road ahead, my headlights do little to pierce through the veil of water vapor that had amassed over the roadways during the night. The time is just under four AM and there are no other cars in sight. As I settle in for the drive, I reach over to the passenger seat and open the sleek black CD case that is to serve as my travel companion for the trip. My intention for the weekend, in addition to traveling to compete in the Cloudland Canyon 50K Trail Race in

Trenton, GA, was to reflect upon my life thus far. Having just recently turned twenty-seven in late November and logging hundreds of solo miles to prepare for the race I have been giving a lot of thought to how it is that I came to be the person I am today and why it was that I wanted to attempt a thirty-mile run. In doing so, I could think of no better way to ponder these questions than to listen to the very music that has shaped my life to get me to this very moment. I have observed in my own life, like countless others, that the music I am listening to, or the absence thereof has played a significant role in my life and how many of my fondest memories are tied to the rhythms and lyrics of certain songs.

Thumbing through the leather worn case, I am literally looking at what I would consider to be the soundtrack of my life. In preparation for the drive, I had done my best to organize the fifty plus CD collection into chronological order as I had either heard an album for the first time or purchased it. I did not officially consider myself a collector of albums until my late high school years but have somehow managed to hold onto or find copies of many of the albums that I have listened to over the years. As I exit the city limits of my small town, I take in another slow swig of coffee and pull out the first album in my catalog; Toby Keith's "Shock'n Y'all".

"Shock'n Y'all" was the was the first album that I ever remember specifically wanting. My mom had gotten it for me as a birthday present when I turned eight years old. Upon throwing in the disc, steel guitar licks begin pouring out of my car's speakers for the opening track "I Love this Bar". Listening to it now, for the first time in years, I have only a faint recollection of the lyrics but am reminded of how much I enjoyed the storytelling aspect of Country music as kid.

Growing up, the primary way that I heard music was by listening to the radio on the bus rides to and from school or on car rides while running errands with my mom. As the youngest of three children, I was able to spend from age three to five entirely with my mom and whenever we would go into town to pick up groceries or to purchase plants for the nursery she worked at, country music would be emanating from the radio speakers. In those days, I had little notion of what other music sounded like but was content to hear the lyrics and sounds that spoke to the way of life we lived.

My parents moved to my childhood home in the early 1990s, just a few years before I was born. Our home was situated in northwest Florida, just a few miles outside of the small town of Graceville. Just a short jaunt off a scenic highway along an even more scenic dirt road, our mobile home rested amidst endless acres of forested pine trees and rolling green pastures stocked with roaming cows as far as the eye could see. Growing up, one could count on my older brother, sister, and I as well as our six other first cousins, to be outside playing in and exploring the countless acres of farmland, woods, and miles of dirt roads that surrounded us. My grandparents were big time farmers in our community back in the day and farmed over two hundred acres of land all around us. These open expanses created a natural playscape for our young minds, especially for me. The outdoors was the perfect stomping ground for me as a rambunctious child. My mom would always call me "the plunderer" because I was always getting into something. It was my prerogative to open every cabinet, drawer, or box that I could find or even rummage through the trash just to see if I could find any useful items that could further feed my active imagination. For me, so

many of those early years were sheer bliss. Growing up outside of town, in what we folk here refer to simply as "the country", I was able to grow up away from the hustle and bustle of city life. This allowed me, early on, to gain an appreciation for the simple pleasures of life. That is, to be content without having tons of friends around or the distractions of heavy traffic, television, or the threat of a violent neighborhood. My parents would frequently force us kids to go outside with the command to "find something to do".

My family, by all accounts, is what I would consider as being middle class in rural America. We did not always have the nicest things, take the most lavish of vacations, or go out to fancy dinners. However, my parents did assure that my siblings and I were taken care of and that all our needs were met. We were not able to have anything we wanted as kids. I remember often that my parents would say "That's too much, put it back" or "That's not worth it" when I tried to throw items into our shopping cart. If there was something I really wanted, I had to earn it in some way, either by doing chores or having good behavior. I learned quickly to be thankful for the things that I had, respect the things I didn't, and to appreciate the process of working towards a goal. I had a simple existence in those times, and I value that. My parents instilled in me that my only priorities were to be a good kid, to try my best at school, and to have fun.

Rolling down the highway, one track fades into another. I am surprised by how many of the songs feature adult themes such as "Whiskey Girl" or "Sweet". I only have a faint recollection of these tunes however, there are a few songs that

I remember quite well and that I would listen to on repeat like “American Soldier” or “Night’s I Can’t Remember, and Friends I’ll Never Forget”. Then, like now, I enjoy listening to these songs today for the stories they tell and their purposeful lyrics. I remember listening to “American Soldier” as a child and being swept up in the spirit of patriotism and doing one’s duty. Even now, I identify with those same sentiments, not as a soldier, but as a father and husband. While I enjoy listening to these tracks now, for me, with most of the songs I have no distinct memories of them. In retrospect, my true fascination with Toby Keith was more with how he represented, cowboy culture with songs like “Whiskey for my Horses, Beer for my Men” and his own country roots which remind me of my own past growing up. Having grown up in the agrarian south, my country roots run deep. I grew up watching western films and shows like *The Magnificent Seven*, *Young Guns*, *Gunsmoke* and *Little House on the Prairie* on television. As a kid it was hard not to fall in love with the mythos surrounding cowboy culture. I was very much into wearing cowboy boots, hats, spurs, and button up shirts whenever I could. Country music further fueled my obsession with artists like Toby Keith, Alan Jackson, or George Strait and many country songs that alluded to vibes of that forgotten way of life in the American West. Looking back, I am glad that I had the foundation of those country songs as my first tastes in music. Most of the songs of that time are about life, love, and the outdoors which were all things that as a kid were comforting to listen to and easy to understand.

As I sift through the memories, still barely being able to peer through the dense fog on the road, it often seems like these memories of my youth are so far away. On many of my

training runs in preparation for the Ultramarathon my mind would frequent these memories of my youth and offer inspiration to me. My childhood was such a happy time. I had very little, if anything, to worry about. I felt loved and protected. I am so grateful to have had that type of experience growing up and is something that I want to provide for my own children.

Chapter 2

Moving in Symphony

My low fuel light had dinged on a few miles back and as I scout for a well-lit gas station, I turn off the radio to enjoy a few moments of silence before moving on to the next album. I am passing through lower Alabama now around the Troy area when I decide to make my first pit stop to refill the car and take a much-needed nature break. With the race the following day, I have been steadily drinking water and my bladder is at full capacity. For any race, especially for an ultramarathon, hydration is key and I always up my water consumption a day or two before a race to make sure I am fully hydrated. To ensure that I would have enough water for the duration of the drive I brought along a six-gallon water jug that my wife and I have frequently used on primitive camping trips. I have plenty of water to refill my trusty thirty-two-ounce hydro flask bottle multiple times over. Back in the car, it takes a few moments for the main cabin to get toasty warm again. Sufficiently satisfied with the memory lane that was Country music, I turn on the radio once more and insert the next disc, this time it is the soundtrack to Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope. As the opening drumbeats of the “20th Century Fox Fanfare” fill my cars speakers my mind is rocketed back to being a kid in the 8th grade listening to the music for the first time. I had rescued the album from a local flea market one weekend and immediately took the album home and gave it a listen all the way through in one sitting. Utilizing the one

radio we had in the house, I remember lying on the floor with my head near the speakers, trying not to disturb the rest of family. I was riveted by the music itself pretending as if I were Luke Skywalker running through the Death Star trying to escape from the Imperial Stormtroopers or flying through space in my very own X-wing Starfighter. Listening to and appreciating the soundtrack was a big moment for me in my life. As the opening “Main Title” fades into “Imperial Attack” my mind sifts through the past remembering how the album transformed my life.

When I listened to the two-disc album set for the first time, I also read along with the music in the accompanying booklet. The booklet features images from the film, notes from the score’s composer John Williams, and has a breakdown of how each song was written showcasing the intent behind the musical motifs for each character or scene. Listening to the music was fascinating in its own right but to also read along as each song was playing and see how that song was created was a step above. The soundtrack’s composer John Williams, now famous for all sorts of films from *Jaws* to *Harry Potter*, cultivated musical themes for each character and would use the speed or tempo of the music to contribute to the overall feel of the scene, bellicose music for the action sequences and deep declamatory notes for the villains. In my mind then, I remember thinking, “if they took this much time, thought and effort into the music of this film, how much more did they invest in the sets, special effects, costumes, or dialogue etc.” This thinking pattern really began to help me cultivate a sense of deep appreciation for how people come to create things. For the next several years, I only listened to film soundtracks and instrumental music from things like

Indiana Jones or Pirates of the Caribbean to Mozart or Beethoven.

As a kid, it is fair to say that I was a nerd. I had a strong sense of ultra-fanaticism, that is, I had a keen affinity regarding imaginary things and a love of history. It all really began when I learned to be able to read and could pick the books I wanted to read. Like many kids, I developed an early love for Dinosaurs. I remember there was an old beat-up copy of a dinosaur encyclopedia at our library that was held together by packing tape. What little was left of the original cover was barely legible. I was one of the few people who would check the book out and I did so repeatedly. I was reading everything I could get my hands on. I checked out books so often that I was asked by the school librarian if I would like to volunteer to help with stocking the bookshelves and cleaning up the library during the occasional weekend. I heartily agreed despite knowing that I would miss Saturday morning cartoons. From that one dinosaur book, I remember taking copious handwritten notes - quickly learning all the dinosaur names, collecting dinosaur toys, and before long amassing my own personal collection of dinosaur books. This is my earliest recollection of what happens when I like something. I must know everything about that thing. My early childhood was filled with me bouncing from one intense interest to another my active imagination running rampant with the likes of Dinosaurs, Knights and Castles, Cowboys & Indians, Pirates, G.I. Joe, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Indiana Jones, Star Wars, Spy Gear, Pokémon, Digimon, Power Rangers, and many more.

In the car, after listening to the somber French horns of “Binary Sunset” a couple of times over, I am reminded of how often I would listen to this one song and pretend that I was Luke Skywalker looking off into the sunset towards endless possibilities seeking an escape from all I had ever known on the horizon. The call to adventure was strong in me however it was a challenge to figure out just what that meant for me. It seemed like in all the movies and comic books I would read the protagonist character would have, in some Shakespearian way, greatness thrust upon them and all they had to do was follow the path before them. While I did not know what that path for me was ultimately, the Star Wars soundtrack did help me to identify one of my greatest aptitudes in life - a joy in learning. By delving deep into a topic and embracing that thing throughout all facets of my life I learned to truly appreciate a thing for what was, what it could be, and for what it meant to others. Star Wars gave me a foundation for my life. I would play endlessly with my toys, create secret bases for the good and the bad guys, take them to play in the tub, and even sleep with my action figures - I had to always protect them from the bad guys.

While sitting in class at school I would often daydream about getting home and putting my action figures up to some new mission. I played solidly with my toys up until the tenth grade. At school, I always kept this part of my life a secret. My family would mention that I was too old to play with toys and at times I may have been a bit embarrassed, but I credit these imaginative pursuits with so much as they allowed me to hold on to my imagination for a bit longer. Even now, at twenty-seven, well over ten years removed from when I last played with my action figures; moments like listening to the “Cantina

Band”, can draw me back into feeling that same level of excitement I used to feel when playing with my toys or imagining that I was in some fantasy world. I have a deep level of gratitude for being able to hold onto my childhood for such a long time and the lessons that it was able to teach me.

It is enlightening for me to think about how these various fandoms allowed me to grow on my own. The stories that I would read as a kid like Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, or even Harry Potter are all based on the fundamental storytelling principles that have existed since the beginning of recorded history. My reading of them allowed me to learn about complex subject matters such as war, good vs. evil, duty, honor, friendship, and love - all through the lenses of my own imagination. My early concepts of right and wrong stem a lot from things like G.I. Joe and Star Wars. I still remember reading the Jedi Code as a young preteen and putting its words up on my wall. These fanaticisms held weight with me in other equally mesmerizing areas and fueled an interest in other real-world topics such as space exploration, martial arts, spying, marine exploration, and getting outdoors to partake in physical activity. Oftentimes, I would wake up early on Saturday morning and take long walks in the woods or build forts and hideouts with my brother. These were some of my most formative years as a kid and I was able to form a bond with the wilderness and nature that I am not sure I would have had without the fuel of these science fiction stories providing ample kindling to my fiery imagination.

Up until the 8th grade, I had guarded my affinity for these various “nerdisms” very closely, not wanting to embarrass myself in front of others by admitting that I still played with

my toys or was into things like Star Wars. When I was in school, these things were not nearly as cool or mainstream like they are today. Back then, one would run the risk of being picked on or being singled out as a nerd for wearing a nifty graphic-T of your favorite film. It was not until I listened to the Star Wars Soundtrack and saw how other people were able to express themselves by pursuing their passions for things that were imaginary that I began to be able to express how I felt on the inside to others outwardly. In the eighth grade, I first started to express my fandom by bringing along my Star Wars novels with me to class and reading them during breaks in between schoolwork assignments. When that was not too widely ridiculed, I began wearing graphic T-shirts that sported various films and science fiction references. Before long, I had developed the reputation of being a Star Wars fan and I must admit that I enjoyed the relative security of the identity that I had from being identified that way. I was proud to be a nerd, to enjoy what I loved, and not to worry about being picked on for it. My classmates accepted it and it became second nature to associate me with Star Wars.

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After listening to the “Throne Room and End Title” sequence, I pull out a few other film soundtracks that I listened to a lot from that time such as Indiana Jones, Superman, and Jurassic Park. I feel a calm peace wash over me as I stroke those memories of that time and place them back into my heart. I have been on the road now for over an hour since my last stop and my legs are starting to get a bit stiff. I shift back in forth in my chair and focus solely on the road ahead for a few minutes. I am barreling north up

Highway 231 making good progress towards the next major city on my route, Montgomery, Alabama. My surroundings are still pitch-black outside. I glance to my watch, a Garmin Forerunner, my loyal running companion, and a gift given to me by my wife on my birthday a few years back. Checking the time, my mind wanders home to my family. “Have my wife and kids started their day or are they still fast asleep in our king size bed.” Although we put our twins to bed in their own room at bedtime, they, in the wee hours of the morning, somehow sneak their way onto our bed and into our arms while our youngest sixth month old son co-sleeps with us. When I left home this morning all three kids and my wife were packed together under the same covers. A peaceful scene indeed.

This thought brings me comfort as I look at my watch again to check the current moon phase. As I suspect, it is a new moon which is something I had not thought about or considered for the race. Potentially for the first few miles I could be running in the dark. “great”. I can hear my wife’s voice now saying “I told you so” as she offered to get me a headlamp for my race a few weeks back. I will make do with what I have. I figure that I can either run with the flashlight on my phone or stay close to someone with a headlamp if it comes down to it. The thought of not being able to see the trail markers and getting lost somewhere out on the course is enough to send me on a hunt for a good distraction and my eyes peer over once again to my passenger seat to see what the next album in the case is. As soon as I see it, my face erupts with a smile as recall listening to the American hard rock group Van Halen for the first time.

Chapter 3

Now We're Rockin'

As I pop Van Halen I (one) into the stereo I skip ahead to track two, Eruption, which was my first real entrance into rock and roll and heavy metal music. From the get-go the entire album grips me by the seat of my pants and takes me on hard rock journey of crashing drums, screaming guitars, and soaring vocals from front man David Lee Roth. The song Eruption is a blistering one and half minute guitar solo that sees lead guitarist Eddie Van Halen shred his way into classic rock history. The song then fades into another classic rock staple, which is a cover of the British group the Kinks' "You Really Got Me". It had been quite a few years since I had sat down and listened to the album but listening to it today it is still an equally fun ride. Especially, as I recall what an impact this one album triggered in my life.

On most every weekend growing up, while the rest of my family slept, my dad and I would head out to scour various yard sales or flea markets in search of good deals and knick-knacks. On one such occasion, we came across a flea market vendor who was selling his entire CD collection. When we asked him why he was selling all his CDs he mentioned that he had converted all his CDs to digital files, and they were just taking up space. As a result, he was selling the CDs for a relatively cheap price for either one or two dollars each. My dad, upon hearing the price, immediately set to rifling through the albums to see if there were any ones he liked. I followed

suit shortly thereafter as the album art and band names on some of the CDs began beckoning my attention. Perusing through scores of records, I saw the likes of Van Halen, White Snake, Billy Squier, Queen, Guns and Roses, Journey, Styx, and another band name that quite intrigued me...Rush. For years my dad had been trying to get me into "his music". He grew up in the seventies and eighties and loved the sounds of the classic rock era. On car rides together he would throw on some of his favorite bands like AC/DC, Pink Floyd, or Led Zeppelin and play some songs for me. I could never get into them. For some reason I just could not connect with the music or the lyrics. In thinking about it now, I was at an age where I only wanted to listen to music that I discovered on my own and rock music was something that I had to find for myself. Between my dad and I we had picked out over twenty different albums and were eager to give them a listen. After the flea market we went to grab some food at a nearby fast-food restaurant and in the drive-thru line we decided to play our first CD from that purchase, Van Halen I. I think if it would have been any other album, rock n' roll may not have had the impact it did on me. My dad played the album at max volume, and it completely blew me away.

From those opening notes I was hooked on Rock music! Fortunately for me, at that same time my school was just about to let out for summer vacation giving me the entire summer leading into my eleventh-grade year to do what I do best - dive deep into something and learn everything I can. That summer I listened to everything I could get my hands on and took my dad's initial CD collection of about 20 albums and added about 80 different records over the course of the summer to help round out the collection. The first album that I

purchased specifically for the purpose of growing a CD collection was KISS Destroyer. I enjoy that album to this day not necessarily musically or lyrically but because of the energy on the record. They were a rock band that wanted to play loud music and have a good time and made no apologies for it.

Later that summer, I had the opportunity to watch a movie entitled Fanboys about some friends who try to see a copy of the film “Star Wars: The Phantom Menace” before it comes out in 1999. One of the principal characters has a love of the band called Rush and throughout the movie Rush songs are filtered into the film’s soundtrack and they really caught my ear. At the time, the name had sounded familiar to me and sure enough I had two albums by them from the recent flea market purchase, Moving Pictures and Retrospective One. After seeing the movie, I soon after pulled out the albums and gave them a listen. Upon listening to Rush, I immediately became enamored by their sound, lyrics, and progressive metal music style. I listened to songs like Tom Sawyer, Limelight, Fly by Night, and Xanadu on repeat. I have always considered Rush, from that moment on, to be my favorite band. Their music steers clear of the sex, drugs, and rock n’roll scene that many bands of the 70s and 80s made so popular and focuses more on fantasy or real-world events which I found enthralling.

During the summer, I had ample opportunity to explore every aspect of rock and roll music. I binge watched “That Metal Show” on TV, purchased more and more music, and explored the origins of rock music through books and internet research. I can still remember gawking for hours over a rock and roll history chart I had downloaded from the internet that

traced rock and roll from its early roots of Jazz and Blues onto the early pioneers like Elvis Presley, Little Richard, and the Beatles. From there the chart splintered into several categories as hard rock and heavy metal music emerged and thusly branched off into a myriad of different categories such as early, new wave, progressive, punk, shock, thrash, or power metal.

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For the next hour or so I pop in one album after another listening to a few of my favorite tracks from the rock records that I had grown up with. Bands like 38 Special, Kansas, Def Leppard, Journey, Jethro Tull, King Crimson, Uriah Heep, Styx, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Whitesnake, Quiet Riot, Queen, AC/DC, Aerosmith, Survivor, Megadeth, Iron Maiden and Foreigner were all on steady rotation at that time in my life. As a result of the music that I was listening to I began to develop my first taste of the vintage era of the sixties, seventies, and eighties and started, much like with Star Wars previously, adapting rock and roll into my daily life beyond just enjoying the artform itself. Going into my eleventh-grade year of high school I would wear whitewashed jeans to school, plaid button up shirts or 80s graphic tees, and converse all-star shoes almost every day. In my mind, my new identity was no longer that of a Star Wars nerd but as an eighty's rocker dude. I do not think anyone really noticed but internally I felt like I was back in that era and that I was born a generation too late.

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I make my second pit stop at rest area in Clanton, Alabama. After a quick get in get out stop to the bathroom I hop back in my rig and sit for a few moments. Gazing at the illuminated entranceway to the bathroom building I ruminate on all the time I spent in those years listening to or learning about rock music. With a slight growl of my stomach, I am drawn back into reality. I reach over into the floorboard of the passenger seat and pull out my lunchbox. Late last night, my wife had packed for me two sandwiches laden with fresh vegetables and baked chicken, one for breakfast and one for lunch, as well as a full dinner for the night consisting of roasted chicken, baked potatoes, and sautéed zucchini. Over the years, I have found that my body performs best on simple whole foods rather than pasta overloads or processed junk food. I unwrap the first sandwich and slowly roll back onto the interstate. Munching away, my mind once again pivots back into my past. This time though, I begin to think about food and my own relationship with it. It was not until my wife, and I began dating that I began to take my nutrition more seriously. Growing up, my family kept our walk-in pantry stocked with all manner of snack foods imaginable, from Little Debbie's galore, Hostess cakes, Pop tarts, Doritos, Lays chips, fruit-roll ups, potted meat, beanie weenies, Vienna sausages, cheese and crackers, Snickers, Reese's, Chips Ahoy, Oreos, Kraft Mac'n Cheese, Coca-Cola, Fruit Loops, or Ramen Noodles.

Suffice it say, had my mom not cooked a full meal every night typically consisting of a protein, starch, and vegetable I would have been raised entirely on what the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey would call the Standard American Diet (or SAD Diet), meaning to eat a diet that

consists predominantly of processed foods, an abundance of sugar, and a general lack of fresh fruits and vegetables. Back then I had no inkling of any such thing as nutrition and the terms such as vegetarian, plant based, or vegan had not made their way into the purview of mainstream conversation, nor did they hold any such attraction for me. In high school, I had dabbled with vegetarianism and cutting out soft drinks but never considered adopting an overall dietary lifestyle for the specific purpose of making my life better.

I can recall a thought I had in high school about those types of snack foods that I mentioned earlier. I remember thinking that those foods were for kids and that when I was an adult, I would pursue a more “adult” diet consisting of a lot of salads, fruits, and nuts - or whatever it was that healthy adults ate. Nowadays, my wife and I do our best to focus on eating a whole foods diet. Rather than counting calories, divvying out portions, or going all out vegan we strive to limit processed foods and focus on getting our primary nutrition from whole foods where we can derive what they are and where they came from. We look for fresh or organic options whenever they are available and while we do have our cheat meals and cheat days most of our diet consists of simple whole foods. As I nibble off another bite of my sandwich, I feel that this dietary style has worked for my family and changed my life for the better as even now, rather than pursuing a fast-food option on this trip I am able to have fresh foods to help my body better prep for the race. For the next stretch of the trip as I start closing in on my destination, I continue to peruse the rock and roll albums that I have brought along with me even getting into some newer artists like the Foo Fighters, Coldplay, and James Bay.

My legs are beginning to get restless as I watch the miles steadily tick down on my phone's GPS to Exit 11 on Interstate 59. I have been in the car now for over five hours and I am ready to be on my feet again. I pull off the exit for Trenton, Georgia I make my way to the Days Inn Hotel. The local Days Inn not only serves as my lodging quarters for the night but is also the location where I will attend church services with the local congregation. I first started keeping the seventh day sabbath back in late 2015 and have been steadily doing so ever since. After donning my church wardrobe in the front seat of my car - tie, shoes, and sport coat - I slip out of my ride and take in my surroundings. Off in the distance I see a mountain that juts abruptly out of the ground creating an imposing wall on the eastern part of the city. I recall the maps I studied of the area before coming to the city and know that somewhere out there, on the other side of that mountain there is a canyon whose name makes a lot more sense now that I see that the top of the mountain is shrouded in fog and clouds.

I am excited to pay the starting line of the race a visit later today and take a stroll around the State Park to see just what it is that I have signed up for. Before that though, I tighten my tie around my neck, say a prayer of thankfulness for arriving to my destination on time, and enter the hotel meeting hall where I am greeted by a warm reception of brethren whom I have never met before. One of the things I very much love about being a part of the Church is that no matter where I go, in almost every part of the country there are likeminded people with whom I have an instant connection with because we share the same faith.

When I walk into the hall the brethren are busy setting up the audio-visual equipment for services. I introduce myself to the small group of older women assembled there and after a few minutes of calm conversation with the brethren about who I was and why I was visiting, we soon discover that we know some of the same people from different church areas. This brightens my spirits as it is wonderful to see just how interconnected the church is across the country. We exchange stories of our attendance of the Fall Holy Days (religious festivals) that we recently experienced and discuss the impact that the Coronavirus has played in our respective hometowns. Mostly though, they are all mesmerized by my reason for being in the area. No one could fathom wanting to run thirty miles at one time, let alone, as they would tell me, at the state park because of how difficult the terrain is. Granted, most of the brethren there are older women who did not do a lot of running but in the back of my mind I begin taking some mental notes about the terrain. I need to ensure that I respect the environment I am in so that I do not overextend myself during the race.

As services begin, I find a seat and lay out my notepad and bible on my lap, something I rarely get to do during services nowadays as my kids are constantly in need of attention during services. The main message of day is a sermon focusing on the name of God and how many people get caught up in the “Sacred Name Movement”. Followers of the moment are people who will only refer to God by certain names, and to refer to him in any other way would be sacrilegious to them. The minister does a great job of refuting the movement providing facts and scriptural support for the names that God does find acceptable. After singing a final hymn to close

services, I stick around and fellowship with the brethren for another half hour. I assure them that I would find some way to let them know how I do in the race and that if I ever visit again, I will have my wife and kids in tow. Upon exiting the meeting room, I check in at the front desk of the hotel to see if my room is ready. The polite attendant assures me that I did indeed have a room, but it would not be ready for a few more hours. That is okay with me. I bid her farewell and exit the cramped lobby. Stepping out into the open, I breathe in the crisp mountain air, the temperature sits comfortably in the low sixties. I gaze out across the valley towards the mountain range known as the Cumberland Plateau. I feel like Bilbo Baggins staring at the Lonely Mountain in J.R.R Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. The vertical expanse is calling my name and like Bilbo, while I am excited to get my destination, I am also nervous for what lies within that expanse. However, unlike Bilbo, instead of a dragon waiting for me that I need to avoid there is a one-thousand-foot canyon that I need to confront.

Chapter 4

The Grand Pause

Back in the front seat of my car, I set about making a wardrobe change. Although I have not perfected the near instant phone booth costume transformation like Clark Kent to Superman, I have over the years, become quite proficient at changing clothes in the limited space of the front seat of my car. Being a trail runner, most of the trailheads that I disembark from do not feature private restroom amenities or amenities at all to speak of and I have had to adapt. The majority of my weekly training runs take place during my lunch breaks at work, and I will usually change out of my office work attire into minimalist running clothes in the five-minute drive to the nearest park that has running trails. This time though, I sit idle in the front seat of my car and quickly strip out of my church clothes and into something more comfortable, a pair of khaki shorts and long sleeve race shirt adorned with a logo of a Turkey Trot race that I had competed in a few years ago. Once into my casualwear, I ignite the engine and begin the eighteen-minute drive to the State Park. Along the way, I observe very little in the way of people moving around other than the traffic coming from the interstate.

The small town of Trenton, Georgia appears to be slowly ambling around in league with the overcast skies. The City's website touts itself as a "serene, fertile valley" that can easily play host to a "rollicking family vacation". Looking

around, I find it difficult to track that sense of a vibrant community. As my eyes continue to scan my surroundings, I notice a few parks, a school, some restaurants, and several old homes along the roadside. Although the beauty of the topography is apparent the infrastructure seems less so - maybe December is an off time for them. As I start up the lower levels of the ascent to Lookout Mountain, the beauty of the area begins to take hold. Before long, my car's engine is humming loudly, its RPMs revving high to maintain speed on the steep climb. Peering to my left, my eyes are met by a sheer cliff face while on my right the town of Trenton becomes an expansive wide-open valley, the serenity taking hold.

Halfway up the mountain, I pull over at an overlook area to take in my surroundings. One of the benefits to traveling without my kids on this trip is that I can take my time and explore areas that I would normally not be able to. In this case, I slowly ease my body to the edge of the steep drop off and look down at the city where I had just come from. The weather is cloudy, I cannot make out much more than the city itself and the interstate, where cars are continuously whizzing by. I take in a deep breath of moist mountain air; the smell of damp earth and forest invades my nostrils. Even though I was raised in Florida and am a self-certified beach bum in the summer months, I am frequently drawn to visit mountainous areas like this place. There is a sense of perspective that I feel I get by standing on some high peak that is hard to find anywhere else. Looking up at the mountain, the evidence of winter's imminent arrival in this area is clear. Most of the trees in my surroundings have lost their leaves, giving me a clear view up the mountain where I can see enormous boulders peppering the mountainside for hundreds of yards in every

direction. Wow, I will be running on terrain like that! Scattered among the thick forest, these protrusions of sandstone and shale are not something I am used to back home, not to mention the sheer steepness of the cliffs themselves. The view here further illuminates just how daunting the course will be. I think back to my reasoning behind picking the race.

The race is supposed to be challenging but also scenic in a way that most people, especially myself, would not normally experience in more traditional races. The race website hooks runners to the event with the tagline, “You will pass massive waterfalls, jaw dropping open views of valleys and a sunrise as far as you can see into the horizon.” - apart from the stunning sunsets the former attractions are for sure something I do not get back home. As I finish my scenic break, I take a few photos and depart for the park once again. A few quick minutes later, I make the ninety-degree turn into the park entrance where I am greeted by the park attendant who is standing vigilantly in a small brown and green park building processing park passes and dolling out park maps to eager visitors. After a pleasant exchange with the attendant, I pull forward onto the main entrance road into the park and am greeted all around by a dense forest of rich autumn colored hickory, oak, and pine trees. My vision is flooded with every different shade of green, brown, and orange imaginable.

Unfolding the map as I drive, I try to get my bearings on where it is I am heading to. The race, organized by Runbum Tours, is offering packet pick-up this afternoon as well as tomorrow morning at the Group Lodge building, which is to serve as the start and end point of the race.

Runbum Tours, in addition to hosting the 50K that is taking place on Sunday is also hosting a 50 Mile Ultramarathon and a 13.1-mile half-marathon, both of which had started earlier today. Rather than wait until tomorrow morning and be under pressure to get the venue on time, I had decided to knock that task out this afternoon and then take a scenic walk to explore some of the racecourse to get a better idea of what I will be up against. I drive for what seems to be about a mile, getting ever deeper into the park. In my mind, I begin to wonder where exactly it is this canyon will appear and just how majestic the views will turn out to be. Only three months before, I experienced a similar feeling when my family and I were visiting Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona.

In a rental van tightly packed with two weeks' worth of luggage and three children my wife and I drove several hundred miles from the airport in Phoenix, Arizona through the beautiful red rock areas of Flagstaff and Sedona then eventually to Grand Canyon Village on the outskirts of the South Rim section of the park. As we drove through the ranger station, we began to wonder just how magnificent the canyon would be compared to all the pictures and videos we had seen on the web and TV. We had a hard time imagining that such an enormous crater would open before us when we were surrounded by such lush forest. Then, in an instant, the world disappeared and opened to a massive sprawling canyon that could only be described as epic. Even my two-year-old's were astonished at the view as the world around us dropped out below as far as the eye could see. In the car now, I wonder how this "little Grand Canyon" will compare. After passing the campground area and several service roads I finally make it to the turn for the group lodge that is, according to map, just

around a steep bend in the road. As I am turning, I notice a sign that says “To Overlook Trail and Waterfalls” - that’s where I want to be heading next. Pulling into the parking lot of the Group Lodge several empty cars litter the open meadow surrounding the building. A few pedestrians are ambling around and there are several tents set up that I can only imagine house support crews for individual runners - this is serious. As I depart my car and walk toward the Group Lodge to check in, I notice other runner looking types standing around and am reminded of how many times I have been in a situation like this before. I have competed in hundreds of races and events throughout my life and for a good while in my late high school and early adulthood years I had it in my mind that athletics and competing in running events would actually be the sum total of my life goals and desires. As I am about to enter the group Lodge, I notice several boxes filled with race day swag and awards. In my youth, winning was all that had been of importance to me when it came to running. “My, how the years have changed me.”

When I was twelve years old, I began my first foray into running. My mom had this rule growing up that my brother and I could not play competitive sports until we were in at least the sixth grade. To this day, she has never really given us a reason for this rule other than that she did not want us going out and getting hurt. At the time, this bewildered my brother and I to no end but as a parent now, I can see where she was coming from. I think she did this out of love, wanting not only to protect us from injury with contact sports like football, but also to make sure that we had time to be kids and not have to worry about complex sports practices and

schedules. In my small town, sports were all the rage, and Friday night football games were the pinnacle of entertainment. As kids, my brother and I wanted to be out playing football and baseball with the other area kids in the various pee-wee and youth sports leagues. Alas though, we had to wait until sixth grade.

When I finally did hit the sixth grade that meant for me the beginning of a new school, new classes, and the opportunity of starting to play sports. The whole process of starting afterschool sports coincided with beginning Junior High and was a particularly stressful time for me. Fortunately, as the youngest child I was able to learn from my older siblings who gave me some of the tips and tricks about navigating between classes (going from one classroom a day to seven different ones), having a locker, and being on the same campus as high schoolers – they were huge! While that was intimidating, what I was most excited about during that school year was the opportunity to play sports. By this time, I did not have a love of any of the major sports like football, basketball, or baseball like many of my peers. I remember feeling that those sports were just too popular; plus, my cousins were already better at those sports than me growing up. I wanted to do something different. Essentially, once past those major sports there was but one option left that my school offered – Track and Field. When the Spring semester started, I went out for the Track and Field team. I quickly found out that because we did not have many participants, no one was going to be cut from the team; especially distance runners. This was good news to me as I knew that I was not a very fast runner however from playing around over the years I felt I could be able to be a decent distance runner.

I still remember the last day that I had before beginning my first track practice. I was walking through the woods exploring, trying to clear my mind, an activity I still partake in even now, debating in my head whether I should run track in the first place. The idea of sacrificing two hours of my afterschool time to exercise instead of playing in the woods with my toys or watching my favorite TV shows seemed like an uneven tradeoff - this was a major decision for a kid! I did not know it then but by going ahead with Track and Field that following day I would set myself down a path that would drastically alter my life for the better and set me on a positive habit that would still be ever present in my life. After making the decision to commit, I began the next day. Admittedly, I was terrible at first. In races, I competed in the mile and two-mile events and usually came in either last place or very close to last being several minutes behind the winner. I considered a race a success when I managed to not be lapped by the race leaders. The only thing I had going for me was a natural talent for being able to suffer the distance of the longer races. However, the speed and strength that was needed to really be a competitor was something that I would have to work incredibly hard for. One major reason for this was that I was what most people consider a late bloomer, I remember not having armpit hair until well into the 9th grade while my other classmates had full armpit hair and even mustaches while I struggled to find my peach fuzz. Further, my quad, calve and hamstring muscles did not begin taking shape and developing until after my 11th grade year of high school.

Even so, I was determined to be on the team and do my best. Over the next few years of middle and high school I had a love-hate relationship with running. I loved the aspect

of getting outside and running for the way it made me feel but the rigidness of the competition and track itself made me not enjoy the sport very much. I remember seriously considering giving up running in tenth grade. I had been overworking myself with summer basketball and then rolled right into cross country and regular basketball season at the same time. For about four months there, my schedule was slammed with schoolwork during the day and afterschool activities for a few hours in the afternoon. At the end of those two seasons, I was wiped. I made the decision at the end those seasons, to not do track and field and abstained from the first few practices in the spring. At the time, I had become really good friends with a classmate of mine, and he was doing track for the first time. He was so excited to be doing the sport and would give me updates on the first week of practices, telling me about all the people running that year. After listening to this for about two weeks he finally convinced me to give track another try. After getting approval from the coach who happily welcomed me back, I went out to my first practice with a slight chip on my shoulder.

This was a pivotal moment in my life and without having my friend convince me to do so I am not sure if I would have ever gone back to track and field. In my tenth and eleventh grade years of high school I was beginning to have some success at running and even made it to the state finals in track and cross country. I entered the final race of my eleventh-grade year, the state finals, as a hopeful competitor, I remember thinking that I had a shot to place on the podium and that I could do well in the race. In reality, I was a scrawny and naïve kid who had little chance. The race was held on an abandoned horse ranch in Dade City, FL against about 300

or so runners. I was overwhelmed at the sheer number of runners and spectators there. When the five-kilometer race started, I was quickly swallowed up by the field of runners. I can still remember the cacophony of footsteps plodding along the path, a stampede of young testosterone, the sound was incredibly loud and something I had never experienced before. I ended up finishing in 37th place, almost three full minutes behind the winner. It was such a shock to my ego, pride, and athleticism that I was kind of depressed over it for quite some time. My hopeful thoughts prior to the race had been shattered by my own lack of ability to run as fast as my competitors. In my 11th grade track and field season, like in cross country, I once again qualified for the state finals and like in cross country I was decimated by the competition, coming in next to last place. I was defeated again. It was not a good feeling for me. I desired to be better. Not only because I wanted to beat the other competitors, but I wanted to prove to myself that I could do something I found to be meaningful; that I could set my eyes on a goal, train for it and then execute my plan. From then on, I knew that if wanted to be at the top level I would have to train much harder.

The seed was planted then to really take running seriously. Going into my senior year of high school I wanted to see how good I could get; I was tired of getting smoked by so many runners. From here I started to shift away from many of my fanboy pastimes and rock and roll music exploration to begin zeroing in on becoming the best runner I could be. My only identity up until this point, how my peers saw me and how I viewed myself, had been the shy nerdy kid. In my mind I felt I could be the super athlete guy. It would take me another full year from this moment to really start gaining any

kind of traction in that arena. During that time, it was a school of hard knocks to determine what my optimum level of training should be and figuring out what foods I responded well to. After track season ended though, I took a break from running and shifted my focus to my schoolwork to get me through the rest of the semester.

In the last few weeks before school let out for what would be my last summer vacation of high school, I found myself in my track coach's classroom chatting about the previous season and the potential of a summer running schedule. Even though I had been beaten down that year during both running seasons I wanted to press on. It was here that I learned about the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) track league. I was excited for this opportunity because it meant that I could train during the summer, which is something that I had never done successfully before, and it would mean I had something to look forward to in the races themselves. During this time, I also discovered some running magazines that my coach had laying around in his classroom for his students to read whenever they had a break. I remember being intrigued by one of the cover's, a man shown to be running in barefoot sandals. Upon turning to the first article, I began reading voraciously. I couldn't believe there was an entire magazine edition dedicated to the topic of running. I had never thought running could be that pervasive and that it was something that people did as hobby. I learned about some of the top athletes of the time and individual people's stories that were not professionals but had a unique perspective on running because it changed their life in some way. My mind was opened to a whole new world, and it was wonderful.

I took several magazines home with me that day and soon after signed up to start receiving them in the mail myself. The premier titles at the time were the Running Times and Runner's World magazine and each issue featured articles on how to train, race, eat, think while running and highlighted stories from people who ran for fun - far out! The magazines were a great motivating factor for me as they showcased people who thought in a way like mine. The magazines allowed me to establish a connection to other likeminded individuals and filled a gap that I felt I was lacking from my family and classmates. It was also here that I started to develop a connection with running for health and wellness. It seemed that running may not only be just for competition. Going into the summer I had a slew of new running tactics to try and new idols to look up to. From the magazines, I learned about the elite running athletes of the time like Galen Rupp, Dathan Reitzenhien, and Shalane Flanagan and began following the professional running circuit. Previously, all my running knowledge and interest was focused solely on the physical side of the sport. Now I had access to whole new avenues to explore.

Running began to consume my life through television, books, and magazines thereby sparking the embers that remained after those crushing defeats earlier in the year. When school let out for summer vacation it was an odd experience. This was going to be my last summer vacation as a high school student and potentially my last one ever. Summer vacation had always been a highlight in my life. When I was in the world of high school all I could think about was the endless cycle of Monday through Friday school days and then desperately longing for the weekends. I was caught

up in the school system and did not think much beyond that routine as it was something I had gotten used to. Going into that summer, I had not made any plans for college or figured out what I wanted to do after high school. The only future I could envision involved running competitively in some way. I tried to avoid those thoughts as much as I could for fear of the unknown. Although I tend to think fondly upon my high school experiences in hindsight, I do notice how the public school system often is not relative to actual life experiences. I was one of those students for whom, at least while I was in it, the academic part of school I enjoyed. I had become so accustomed to going to school that I was not sure how I would function outside of the school system. I took it as a challenge to learn a new concept for a test or assignment and then was very good at regurgitating that information for a test. This skill of regurgitating or having a photographic memory has served me well over the years but left my mind wondering if I could do anything else.

For all my limitations, overall, I feel that my high school did help to prepare me for my life ahead. Before I could begin that journey though; I had one summer and my senior year ahead of me. After school had let out for break, I had been running a little bit to try and maintain fitness but was not training officially as I had been really enjoying the much-needed rest and relaxation during those first few weeks. When practice began in earnest for the summer season, I was far out from being in top shape. To me, this was a good thing because it is satisfying to be able to track your progress over time and see how much you can improve. Our scheduled track practices took place in the mid afternoon during the heat of the day making the workouts even more arduous. We had

practice three days a week, which meant if I was going to succeed, I would have to do a lot of training on my own. This was a new concept for me as up until that point essentially all my running had been done in a controlled environment either afterschool during practices, during races, or with someone else. Here, I was beginning to run longer distances for training and started enjoying running for more than just sport, though still being very much caught up in the competition aspect of it all. My thoughts were consumed with times, distances, and beating the person ahead of me.

At the first track meet of the summer season, I remember not having too high of expectations. I did not know what to expect as it was unlike the usual high school meets where your competition are fellow students from rival schools, instead the competitors were from all over the state. I was scheduled for two races during the first meet; the 800 meters and the 1500 meters (essentially a half and full mile run respectively). In both races the field of competitors were the same people and toeing the starting line I felt, judging from their appearance, that I could win. However, much to my displeasure, I lost both races by a considerable amount of time. Once again, I found myself asking what I had done wrong. Had I not trained or eaten well enough? What could I do to get faster? After that race I went back again to the drawing board, determined to make it my goal to beat all of those runners who had just smoked me in those two races.

From here I began to run more often and from my limited research, began developing a training plan that would typically see me train six days a week with one rest day. On training days by myself I would usually run at home taking a

stroll down the dirt roads or hitting the trails that outlined our property. During these runs alone I began to develop a love for running. It seems odd to love an activity that can be so difficult at times but the effects of running on my life were undeniable. There is something special about running and even endurance sports in general. These types of activities are both challenging and rewarding at the same time. Running became an outlet for stress, stimulating every muscle in my body. It helped me to clear my mind, give me regular bowel movements (I have learned not everyone is so fortunate), gave me better sleep, and helped me maintain a healthy weight. As a young person in my late teens, running provided stability to my existence and gave me an identity that helped in all areas of my life, as I could be a runner at any time. The lessons I learned in running, such as being able to endure a certain distance or pushing through pain I would in turn apply to my schoolwork and various other life situations allowing me to continue improving in all areas of my life. With running, to be good, you must train. It can be difficult and challenging at times, as there are oftentimes harsh conditions or rough terrain, but it can also be carefree and enjoyable. In the end, there is always the running and that stays constant. I was able to apply this in life because I enjoyed learning new things and trying to improve myself. To do that though I had to keep “running” or as it related to my schoolwork, I had to keep reading, studying, and reevaluating myself if I wanted to continue improving.

As I began my senior year of high school, I also began to resign myself from many of my social friend groups at school and became more of a loner. Essentially an only child with my brother and sister off attending college, I was free to

my own devices. This did not include much social activity on my part. On the occasions that I did hang out with my classmates I would only carry-on surface level conversations with them. I never really felt totally comfortable with my peers. Looking back, I am not sure if this was fear on my part at being an outcast, general shyness, or just immaturity. I distinctly remember focusing most of my attention on all things running and that did not leave a lot of time for much else in my life. I had shed the earlier “nerdisms” that I used to publicly display in the form of t-shirts and sci-fi novels. Trading those items instead for running magazines, race t-shirts and gym shorts. Running, especially the way I approached it, was markedly different from pretty much everyone at my school. I lived and breathed Cross Country, Track and Field, and racing outside of school. I wore a different race shirt to school each day and always had my nose buried deep in running magazines or running books.

I remember delving deep into our library bookshelves, finding the only running books that were available and soaking up the information they stored like a sponge, trying to unlock the keys of distance running that could propel me either to a state championship or a college athletic scholarship. There was probably a grand total of no more than ten running specific books at our library and I voraciously studied them all. On the inside of each book, taped to the back cover, there was a notecard that had the name of everyone that had checked out that book since it was first issued at our school’s library. I had thought myself special then, when most of the books that I was reading had maybe one or two names in them and they were at least thirty years old. This further strengthened my thought process that I was

a loner. It was me up against the world, focusing on achieving my dreams, and that because these aspirations were so vastly different from my peers that I felt I just did not fit in with the others at my school. In some ways, this was true as not many people at my school understood the concept of endurance sports. I was the only person who ran several miles a day and who had ambitions to be an elite high school distance runner or even more, to become a collegiate runner or someday a professional.

Where my sense of isolation displayed the most to me was during lunchtime breaks at school. The thirty-minute lunch periods were for grades nine through twelve and were grueling to me as I did not have a particular group of friends that I would sit with. My two options were to either sit with my classmates, whom I knew and could carry on casual conversations with, or sit with a few underclassmen, who were more interesting to talk to but usually a little too goofy for me. Often though, since I brought my lunch from home, when the lunch bell echoed through the hallways, I would slip away from the crowd of students that were marching to the lunchroom and sneak off to our school's gymnasium. Once clear of masses and sure that I was not being followed, I would then slip out the back of boys' locker room and head out to the football field behind the school. After a short hike up the empty home side stadium bleachers, I would find a spot at the top of the stadium and sit down to eat. I can vividly remember many times where I would get to my perch at the far corner of the bleachers and stare intently down at the open field below just contemplating life with the mid-day sun beaming and a cool breeze reaching me at that height. On my mind constantly was the thought of trying to figure out just how I

could become a professional runner or at least a collegiate one. I continuously racked my brain for an adequate answer to the question, “What do I want to do with my life?”. The only real things that spoke to me as something that I was truly passionate about, were my experiences in appreciation of all things fandom and running.

During my senior year of Cross Country, I made it all the way to the State finals for a second time. I had very high hopes coming into the last race of the season however, I had already peaked, the point when one reaches maximum endurance potential for a certain window of time, about 2 weeks earlier at the regional finals and I did not take the time to fully recover. I was someone who really enjoyed training for races, and because of that I tended to overindulge in my intensity efforts during training sessions. In addition, I suffered a near debilitating back injury that flared up about a week before the race (from overtraining) that served to put my mind under a lot of stress thinking that I may not even be well enough to race. Back then, I was all about going out and hammering every run and did not alternate between easy days and hard days. Nevertheless, at the state finals I put up a decent result, placing 5th overall with a time of 16 minutes and 12 seconds - the sweet sub-sixteen eluding me by a mere 12 seconds (12 seconds feels like an eternity when you are exhausted). I remember the feeling of seeing my dreams slip away. The final two to three hundred meters of the race was one long straightaway; I could see the giant race clock that entire stretch. Second by second the time slipped away, I saw my competitors surge ahead and was unable to respond, my legs were drained. All in all, the season was not what I hoped it would be, but I was proud of myself for coming back after

last year almost two minutes faster and placing much higher up in the overall rankings. I took about two weeks off from running after that race, a much-needed respite, giving me plenty of time to analyze just what went wrong. After combing through various high school running results platforms, I stumbled across some video of the race and was able to observe myself running at various stages of the event. The first thing I noticed on the film was my appalling running form. The footage was shocking to me, I was able to see just how much my form faltered as the race went on. The main thing that really bothered me were my arms; one arm remained at a relatively comfortable 90-degree angle during the race, while the other arm and wrist, flapped around uncontrollably. I immediately wanted to try and rectify this issue so, on my very next run, I began to analyze my running form more fully. I ended up making some, what I would consider to be, massive changes to my overall running stride. For some reason, even after reading all of those running textbooks, I had not thought to address my own running form. I discovered that not only did my right arm flail and slip down as I got tired but that my arms swung a bit too wide. I was also leading my stride from my feet, throwing my foot forward with each stride, rather than leading with my upper thigh and knees. After making these changes and always making a conscience effort to swing my arms evenly, I saw some improvements in my ability to maintain pace, charge up hills, and experienced less injuries.

With confidence in my newfound running form, I began to set my sights on the upcoming track and field season. In between that time though and during that final track season I found myself having to face, in earnest, the inevitable question, of “What in the world am I supposed to do after

high school?” Our school guidance counselor had tried to help us apply for colleges and scholarships and I ended up applying to a few, two for running potentially the University of West Florida and Clayton State University as well as two schools for academic purposes Flagler College and Chipola College. After seeing the things my brother went through as he was trying to navigate college life while still living at home my goal was to get away, to go to college somewhere for running. I remember sitting on the roof top of my childhood home staring up at the stars in tears, desperately wanting the dream of pursuing running at college to come true. Looking back now, I am not sure if I can truly understand why I wanted it so badly. Maybe it was because it was all I had known or the only thing I felt like I was good at. Either way, then and now I continue to love the sport and I can only think that my connection to running was just so pure then that a life without it as my number one priority did not seem enjoyable. Academically, I was in line to be the class valedictorian. For me, that meant if I was to go the Chipola College (our local community college) then I would the first two years of my tuition paid free of charge. With my parents unable to help pay for school, I saw this as my best option at the time. Before I could make that choice though I had to finish out my senior year.

Because I had taken a few advanced placement classes during my eleventh-grade year and had already knocked out my foreign language credits, my senior year was essentially a formality. I only had two actual classes mixed up between some Teachers Aid assignments as well as two free period Physical Education (P.E.) classes that were beginning and ending of the day. While there was the option to take some

beginner college courses at Chipola College I found myself not wanting to make the twenty mile commute every day and saw it as a distraction from running. I elected to remain on campus and enjoy my senior year wanting to experience all that I could of “senioritis”. Looking back, I think it was the right decision. It was more practical to get a jump start on college, but I am so thankful for all the free time that I had during my senior year to just be me, to have minimal responsibilities, and to focus on my hobbies. Maybe I was delaying the real world. There was a fear in me of not knowing what I was going to do after high school, and I channeled that fear into my running. I put all my free time into the sport. I felt that if I was ever going to have a shot at running professionally, now was my opportunity. First period P.E. classes afforded me the opportunity to ride my road bike to school and not have to worry about being sweaty during my first class. I would roll right into school and head straight to the gym.

During my last period P.E. class, I would always check in for roll call then slip out the back door of the boy’s locker room (see a theme here) to go train. I would often lace up my running shoes and run several miles before my actual track practice started late in the afternoon. It was such a fun time. I would start from the student parking lot then leave campus (I do not really think I was officially allowed to do so) to run all over the city of Graceville. I discovered then that running was my favorite way to experience a place or destination. It was invigorating to immerse myself in an environment that I had grown up in but never really experienced for myself, usually I would just drive by the old downtown buildings and parks and not think twice about the history behind these places. On one

of my runs, I discovered that our town had an outdoor racquetball court and subsequently took up the sport on my own, frequently playing for thirty minutes to an hour for fun before school started. The absence of close friends meant that it was up to me to find my own fun and I was okay with that.

Now, nearing the end of my senior year, I am an adventurous, anxious, and impressionable eighteen year just beginning to come to terms with the real world and yet at the same time trying my hardest to make my dreams a reality. After a somewhat disappointing cross-country season I was more motivated than ever to come back in the spring for the track and field season. In the meantime, my track coach was able to secure two college visits for me. During both visits, my sense of the athletes with whom I would have been training with were a little disappointing as they did not seem all that into the sport themselves. The overall picture the visits painted was not quite as romantic as I had imagined. Even still, I wanted to go. However, another piece of the puzzle of adulthood that I was also coming to grips with was money. Life is expensive and both schools that I wanted to attend for running only offered me partial athletic scholarships. I remember one night saying to myself "I am going to figure out how I can pay for college on my own!". I worked for about an hour or two on a workable budget and convinced myself that it was possible. However, after bringing the idea up to my parents I could see right away that there was no way it could happen unless I took out some sort of student loan. The student loan path was not only fraudulent with difficulties and the fear of the unknown, but at the time my heart also wanted to make a rational decision and not be broke as well.

As life went on, I trained harder than I ever had that season. I became a vegetarian, focused on my strength training, and consumed running media. I once again made it to the state finals to battle against the best the state had to offer in the 1,600-meter (mile) and 3,200-meter (two-mile) disciplines. The mile was the first event up for me. My time going into the race was a solid four minutes and twenty-six seconds, which if I would have run that on the day, I could have won the race. Instead, I followed the pace set by the pack and was outsprinted at the end. I remember that feeling of defeat well. After having trained so hard for so long and being at the end of all those years of running my heart had gone out of the sport. Fear had consumed me, fear of going all in. I tried to keep it all together and stay within my abilities instead of just going for it and that was my downfall. In both races, I managed to finish in a decent result but even before those races began my season had ended a few weeks prior at the regional meet where I had put all my effort into the race to try and make it to the finals. Something happened between that race and the state finals. Maybe it was because on paper I knew I was slower than the other top athletes by several seconds, I really had peaked prior to that race, or mentally I knew that my dream of being a collegiate runner was not going to happen. Either way, at the state finals I was not at my best. It is a tough thing to lose and have everyone that cares about you there watching you fail. Maybe they did not see it that way...but I did. I had to watch in my parents in the stands watch me lose. It did not feel great. Later, as my parents picked me up after the meet, we all stayed in the city of Jacksonville another night rather than driving home and I had my first cut of meat in several months that night at dinner, I felt that I had earned it after such a long process of eating

healthy and training. Overall, it did not feel worth it. Eating the meat for one, and all the hard work and sacrifice that had went into the training.

Coming off that loss, there were just a few months of school left and I decided to play it safe and accept the offer from Chipola College to have my first two years of school paid for. Along with that came the responsibility of being the valedictorian, which essentially just meant I got to sit at the front of the class during the graduation ceremony and also give a short commencement speech. The speech was something that I had heard whispers about but figured that if I did not mention it to anyone, maybe everyone would just forget. About a week before the graduation ceremony one of my teachers asked how my speech was going and I sheepishly avoided the subject saying I would get to work on it. Too late, I was locked in. Afterschool that day I sat down for a few hours of tedious writing and tried to create something that sounded official and inspiring. I remember thinking that I had no good advice for my peers and there was nothing I could say that would invigorate them post high school. I eventually churned out a two-page speech that was overall quite terrible. However, there was nowhere to run (I wish) and time was up; with limited rehearsals and only one proofread, I handed the speech over to my teachers and presented it on the day with Barrack Obama style sentence pacing.

I was so nervous that I could only get out a few words at a time. Once it was over, I got my diploma, shook a few hands, and hopped in my car to make the drive home as an official high school graduate. On that drive, I knew many of my family members were at my parents' home waiting for me

to get there. I remember taking the dirt road there that night and wanting to stretch the time out - some moments you cannot get back. It felt as though graduation was a large step in enormous and ever evolving chain of events that was my life. Nonetheless, I gave into the night and enjoyed a nice evening with my family devouring an unhealthy dose of cake, ice cream, and hotdogs.

I then had the summer to get prepped for college. I have very few distinct memories of this time. The only thing that I remember doing a lot of, was cycling. After track season ended and some time had passed for me to come to terms with not running in college, I began to ride my bike more and more and investing much of my time in tackling longer and longer distances by myself. A solo forty-to-fifty-mile ride was an easy challenge for me. I also began riding with a local riding group out of the nearby town in Dothan, AL which was about 25 minutes away. I was trying to do something to distract me from a life without competitive running and needed an outlet for my restless mind that was constantly worrying about my next "life step". Those first few years of college were the toughest years that I have ever experienced emotionally, and I eventually found myself in a desolate place. To grow from my past, I would have to forget everything that I had learned if I was going to figure out just who it was, I wanted to be.

. . .

Now at twenty-seven, I am more confident in the person that I am and feel that the experiences I went through in high school served a pivotal role in getting me to this very spot. As I amble into the common area of the Group Lodge Building, I am greeted by silence. It takes me a moment to

notice there are a few people on the far end of the room. The rest of the large room is littered running swag on tables, race snacks, boxes of race gear stacked high, and several types of sports drinks. I casually announce myself and ask if I am in the right place to check in for the race. With casual ease, a lady sits aside her lunch that she was slowly nibbling on, and ambles over to help me. I tell her my name and she pulls up my information. She lets me know that I am assigned the race number 322. She hands over my race bib that I am to wear tomorrow as well as a blue cold weather beanie adorned with a park logo and race title “A Park Above the Clouds, A Race Above Them All”. I smirk to myself about the race motto then bid the race volunteers a farewell. Before leaving the start area I decide to take a short tour of the immediate area surrounding the Group Lodge to get an idea for what I am in for tomorrow. Things like bathroom locations and the best parking place become critical intel on early race day morning and as many details as I can cross off my mental checklist the better.

Walking over to the inflatable race arch, I notice several athlete tents that are set up. These tents are filled by the runner’s crew members who are busily keeping themselves occupied until their man or woman will come by the aid station. They must be ready to give their runner all the food, water, and pep talks they can muster at a moment’s notice. There is a warm fire radiating a gentle heat in the open air as well as light music playing over PA system creating a calm atmosphere. The Group Lodge is the epicenter of the whole race. Out on the course people are literally putting themselves through the ultimate test of mental and physical endurance and yet here, at the eye of the storm, everything

seems very chill. With enough sightseeing of the race start and finish area, I slip back into my car and make the short drive down the service road to explore some of the parks trail systems and see what all the fuss is about this, “Park Above the Clouds”.

Chapter 5

A Park Above the Clouds

Pulling into the parking lot, I am just a few hundred feet away from the Main Overlook viewing area, however because of the way the land is sloped I have yet to lay eyes on the canyon proper. I can see off in the distance where there is a break in the thin tree canopy that opens to empty sky beyond. I have the park map unfurled in my lap and am reading over the description for the waterfalls trail. As I read, I experience a slight sense of trepidation, “Visitors should note that this trail is strenuous and is not suitable for everyone”. I figure that if I am about to run the trail the next day, it should not be a problem for me to take a nice scenic walk through the terrain. After all, my only goal for the rest of the day was to lay eyes on the canyon from the rim and to visit the waterfalls. I feel I have plenty of time to spend on the trails, even if they are difficult. From all that I had read, the three waterfalls within the canyon are supposed to be stunningly gorgeous. More specifically though, the waterfall trail is an important part of the race route for tomorrow. I am pretty sure I will not have time the next day to do much sightseeing if I plan on racing the whole thing. I figure I will not be on the trail for more than two hours and decide to travel without my backpack. I down a few cups of water, grab my phone and trail map then set out north to the Main Overlook. After a minute and half walk, I am rewarded by a breathtaking view of the Cumberland Plateau via the rugged Cloudland Canyon.

Jutting out in my immediate view I see the West Rim, a massive pile of sandstone rock featuring a rounded peak blanketed by tall slender trees and low-lying shrubbery. The edge of the mountain before me abruptly drops off at what looks like a ninety-degree angle, straight down over nine hundred feet below. I try to comprehend what I am seeing; the whole canyon is this way. When the ground reaches the side of the canyon it dramatically falls away descending to the gulch below. I take a few pictures then amble over to an informative display that showcases what the viewer is seeing. I am overlooking Sitton's Gulch, which begins at the base of the canyon and stretches out to the edge of the state park's northern boundary. Beyond that is Lookout Valley and Sand Mountain, along with this stretch of the park and Lookout Mountain these areas make up the vast Cumberland Plateau. As I look out over the canyon, I notice movement out of the corner of my eye. It is a lone runner heading straight for me. I quickly note that across their chest is a race bib, just like the one I received only a few minutes earlier. I think aloud to myself, "must be one of the half-marathoners".

Sure enough, as they get closer, I can make out the race logo on their bib and give them a heartfelt "Keep up the good work!" message of encouragement. Noting the way they came; I double check the park map and see that they came from the direction of the Waterfalls Trail. I take a few more quick photos with my iPhone and begin heading down the path. Every few minutes a lone runner passes by me, and I give them all some sort of encouragement, they all look extremely tired at this point offering an out of breath but appreciative, "Thank You!" This waterfall section appears to be no joke. When I get to the first flight of stairs, I am overwhelmed by

just how far down I will be going and just how many stairs it will take to get me there. From the trail map, I learn there are well over 600 steps that lead to the bottom of the canyon. I take it one step at a time slowly descending. In the distance, I can hear the gushing of water echoing off the canyon's walls, letting me know I am close.

When I spot the first trailhead of the Waterfalls Trail, I see my first glimpse of the race organizer's signage and course markings. The race route tells runners to head left first towards the start of the canyon for an out and back loop then continue heading down the canyon to each successive waterfall in additional out and back loops till eventually you make your way all the way to the end of Sitton's Gulch at which point runners then head back up the trail to the Main Overlook Trail - this is good scouting for the race tomorrow. I head left on the trail and after about three minutes come upon a stunning waterfall cascading fifty feet down over the canyon wall into a serene shallow pool of water. The pool, from where I stand, stretches about one hundred feet across to the other side. This waterfall marks the beginning of Daniel Creek's entrance into the canyon. Further down the gulch, Daniel Creek is joined by Bear Creek and together they are the primary contributors for how the canyon has been carved out over the centuries. Scientists speculate that the canyon was once located at the bottom of an expansive ocean and was formed by several earthquakes that took place more than 200 million years ago beginning in the Paleozoic Era. All around, there are various sizes of sandstone and shale rocks littering the base of the splash pool. I can only imagine the forces that caused these rocks to end up here and how they have been weathered out by the creek itself, eventually creating the

smooth stones that I observe now. The waterfall reminds me of a location from *Kung-Fu Panda*, the Pool of Sacred Tears - the movie is one my kid's favorites and mine too if I am being honest. After breathing in the moist air for a few minutes I turn around and head back in the direction of the other waterfalls. As I walk, I note for the first time how difficult the terrain is. The ground is covered in sharp damp sandstone rocks that are not only slippery but each time my foot plods on the hard surface my minimalist running shoes shoot feedback up my legs to let me know just how unforgiving the rocks are going to be tomorrow.

My footwear for the past several years, and what I plan to race in tomorrow, will be a pair Xero Shoes. After suffering from several recurring lower back, knee, and foot issues utilizing traditional footwear I found myself wondering if I was doing something wrong. I have always felt that running came natural to me but was disappointed that each time I started to ramp up my training I had to be extra careful to avoid injury, either backing off mileage or doing more cross training. At the time, I followed conventional running wisdom and had a different pair of shoes for every terrain and wore heavily padded shoes with a high heel to toe drop to provide "extra comfort" on my runs. In the mid to late 2010s I had been wearing a pair of Brooks Pure Connects and noticed that they had a lot lower drop, or heel to toe ratio, than most other shoes. Even still, I would eventually get a common runner's injury like runners' knee or lower back pain. I started to rethink my footwear and wanted to escape the flashy colors and the ever-changing designs that modern shoe companies were producing. I wanted to take my footwear back to basics. In searching online for a zero drop shoes, I discovered Xero

Shoes. The brand develops shoes that have minimal padding and cushioning underfoot, a wide toe box, and zero drop; all things that will help the runner “Live Feet First” and allow one’s foot and body to develop its own cushioning system with one’s own muscles and joints rather than heavy cushioning underfoot. For the past few years, I have had a few different pair of Xero Shoes and they all have worked very well for me. I have experienced no more common running injuries and feel that my body has gotten stronger because of them.

After visiting the waterfall’s, I decide to head further down the trail and explore Sitton’s Gulch. As I stroll along the cascading, boulder-strewn creek I see a few other hikers and a large group of fathers and sons taking a break on the side of the trail. Seeing the kids there, I feel a pang of loneliness. Experiencing the park is great, but it would be even better if my family were here with me to see it too. I pull out my phone to give my wife a call - wow, I have great signal down here. I connect with my wife on the call and continue strolling down the path. We catch up on our activities for the day and she assures me all is well on her end. She informs me that our kids miss me, but they are doing great. I can actively hear them playing in the background. I let her know how beautiful the scenery is here as we switch to a video call. After a few minutes of Facetiming her some of the view and her showing me the kids we make plans to call each later tonight when I am back in the hotel room. As we hang up, she tells me to make sure that I am taking it all in and enjoying it. She knows how important the race is for me and how much time I have invested to make it here. I assure her that I will and as I hang up the phone I am once again greeted by the sounds of the trail.

Growing up, I would often get to points in my life where my mind was in a bad place. Whether it was as simple as me holding some resentment at my brother or sister for some petty argument that we had, being stressed over my homework, or in a state of angst about a test that I had coming up on each occasion I would head out into the woods for a walk to clear my head. Where I grew up, walking around outside was a readily accessible pastime for me. Being in nature, even without me putting a name to it, would help me clear my mind as a young teenager. As I would walk the sights, sounds, and smells of forest bathing were enough to put my mind at ease. As I walked, I would usually carry-on one-sided conversations with myself and just spill out all my problems and issues that I was facing.

Later, as I began to develop a sense of appreciation for nature and a knowledge of God, I learned that being alone in nature and being rejuvenated by it is something very common for those who are open to it. In the Bible, whenever someone wanted to be closer to God, they did not go to a church or other man-made structure but instead went outside, either to walk into the wilderness or to climb a mountain. Seeking solitude apart from anyone else is something that I must have in my life. Several years ago, I read the book *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* by Dr. John Gray and in it, he pointed out that for most men they must have some moments, either daily or weekly, to retreat into their “cave” and have some alone time to regroup. This has been a true axiom for me in my life.

As an adult now, I do not get as much time in the woods as I used to but running has allowed me to seek out different

places to run away from the hustle and bustle of traffic, where I can get some one-on-one time with nature. The motion of moving forward, the wind rushing through my hair and the sounds of my footsteps plodding along the ground when I am running is a meditation practice for me just as much as it is a physical workout. Walking through the woods now, I feel the same sense of comfort wash over me. When I get to a good stopping point on the trail, an open expanse of forest where the trail starts to jut away from the river, I feel that I have covered enough territory for one day.

I turn around and head back the way I came. On the walk back I tediously cross the boulder laden stream and go up and down several steep punchy hills. The park truly has some amazing geography. The canyon and surrounding area officially became a state park in 1938 and has been dazzling visitors, ever since, with these same views and vistas that I am enjoying today. I feel very happy that I have been able to visit the waterfalls this afternoon and experience this part of the trail; not only because it gives me a good idea of what to expect for the rest of the park for the race tomorrow, but it has been a sheer delight to soak in the park's beauty on a calm day.

Chapter 6

Expanding Horizons

When I arrive back at the hotel, I check in at the front desk and the attendant, who remembers me from earlier, lets me know my room is ready. She mentions that the hotel is short on rooms and that mine will be a handicap unit. She jokes that I should be sure to limp when I am walking to my door. I brush off the crude joke with a bemused chuckle, accept my room keys, and dash out of the lobby. I grab my provisions from the back seat of my car and head into my room. As the door loudly closes behind me, I put my bags down on the desk and am greeted with utter silence. This whole day I have been filling my head with external sounds, first the music in my car, then fellowship with the brethren at church, and then onto the sounds of the forest at the park. Now though, my thoughts are free to envelope my mind - the chatter is overwhelming. For the past two and half years my wife and I have devoted the majority of our waking hours to raising our twin boys and six-month-old. Our home is usually always filled with some type of noise, either from our kids laughing or playing or from mom and dad having to get onto them. Our home is rarely quiet, and my wife and I have to work to carve out special time with each other specifically if we want any time alone together without the kids around. The quiet here is comforting to a degree as I can slow down and think, but also bittersweet as I know I am missing out on

quality family time. With several hours until my bedtime for the night, I focus on passing the time before dinner.

I think about trying to get some writing in and find that the room is just too quiet of a space to write, especially when I know there is a mountain view just outside my door. I grab my computer and carve out a space in the back of my hatchback. I have a great view of the sunset and Lookout Mountain in the distance as I jot down a few notes about the day so far and the music I had listened to on the drive. I pull out my CD case and realize that I have barely scratched the surface of all the music I had brought. I flip through the album sleeves to the next segment of my life's soundtrack. The albums here take me back to a time in my life where I really began to find out who I was as a young adult. Albums from the likes of Pink Floyd, the James Gang, Wishbone Ash, Dave Mason, Nazareth, Mountain, Savoy Brown, Captain Beyond, and Dio were hallmarks of this time. These albums and more were a big part of my life as I was navigating my first few years of college - dealing with not becoming a college athlete, still living with my parents, and seeking to find out what values I wanted to live by.

I had no real interest in pursuing anything. Without track meets or cross-country races to compete in, my athletic pursuits had slacked off considerably. For so much of my life as an older kid, my life was consumed by only seeking tangible goals. Whether it was to get a good grade, win a race, or get a degree; my life had been a series of chasing one thing after the next. Now, with no tangible goals that I felt were worthwhile, I was in a slump. At college, I felt I was away from all that I

had known for the past eighteen years and with the absence of high school I had no clue what my future would look like.

My college experience first began during the summer break before first fall semester. I felt isolated throughout the process of registering for classes, getting my student ID, parking sticker, textbooks, and attending the opening orientation sessions. I was not sure what my place was in the world was or who I wanted to be. For so long, my identity had been tied up in running and cycling. For a time, I tried to keep my exercise routine going and pursue what events I could find on the weekends, until I eventually decided to take a break from endurance sports. I wanted to see if I would miss them. I found my college coursework to be a mere extenuation of my high school curriculum and was not motivated to go above and beyond to complete my schoolwork. I saw it as just another thing to do, each assignment was simply a rote memorization challenge to get a certain grade. Nonetheless, the days passed by and before long my first year of schooling was complete. Going into the summer break, I knew it would be different from all the others as I was determined to get a summer job to help pay for school, have some spending money, and begin my entrance into adult life. I had no idea what I wanted to do for a job, but I could not see myself working in an office, department store, or fast-food restaurant.

I wanted something exciting and different. I recalled a high school experience where the local county was passing out fliers to recruit high schoolers as lifeguards at a park called the Blue Springs Recreational Area. In high school, I did not have a car and had the feeling that I did not want to get a job until I absolutely had to. Now though, with college expenses

mounting, a little more maturity, and the need to branch out I felt the time was right. I thought that being a lifeguard would be the perfect job for me as I liked being outside, was physically fit, and enjoyed the idea of being able to wear a bathing suit as a uniform. After getting a preliminary confirmation that I was accepted for the position following the interview I was informed that I would be hired contingent upon completing the extensive two-week lifeguard certification class. The ensuing class was a unique endeavor for me and presented a good learning experience about how to fit in among a new group of strangers. The course was mentally and physically challenging but after two weeks of instruction I became a certified Lifeguard - Ready to begin my summer adventure!

On my first day of the job, I remember being quite nervous. I had to shadow another lifeguard the entire first day. To me this was an unpleasant task as I had to stand in the sun all day while the “senior guard” got to sit in the stand under the umbrella. However, on Sunday I would get the chance to work on my own and really begin the task of being a lifeguard. On that particular Sunday, I arrived to work early and casually opened the door to the employee office. Upon opening the door, I immediately recognized my boss, who offered his typical “good morn’in” greeting without looking up from his desk, and one other person in the room. That person was a young woman, who proceeded to make her presence known to me by getting up off her chair and extending a tanned bracelet adorned arm out to me. I took her small soft palm in mine and returned a firm handshake as she relayed to me her name and told me who she was. All I heard was her name... “Heather”. Her delightfully sweet silken voice and physical

presence caught me off guard. She was all of five feet two inches but to a shy guy like me she was quite intimidating. She wore baseball cap pulled low on her head, a tank-top that visibly displayed her red lifeguard bathing suit underneath, and Daisy Duke Cut off shorts that neatly displayed her perfectly tanned legs. From that very first moment of meeting her, I knew that there was something very special about her. Her warmth was captivating, not many people, especially attractive girls would give someone the time of day to introduce themselves and give someone a handshake. With my cheeks beginning to take on a reddish hue, I uttered my name in response and explained that I was one of the new lifeguards. From that moment on, I was going to make it a point that summer to discover all that I could about her.

For the next two months, work at “the springs” settled into a steady rhythm of suntan oil application, sunbathing, getting onto kids for running or pushing, and daily dips in the crystal clear sixty-eight-degree water. I became relatively close to all my lifeguard coworkers, especially Heather who I made every effort to speak to whenever the opportunity presented itself. She was just as cool as I had imagined. I would usually try to get to work early so that I could make the lifeguard rotation schedule and put myself next to Heather’s or schedule it so that we could have our breaks together. If I could not swing that, I would provide some excuse to go out to her lifeguard stand and chat with her, “I am here to offer back up coverage” was a favorite tag line of mine, rather than spending time in the air-conditioned employee office where everyone else typically spent their breaks. The two best places to have conversation at the park while on duty were at the diving board station or the boat dock (where we rented out

canoes and kayaks). I am sure she probably caught on at some point that I was into her as she often mentioned in conversation that she had a boyfriend back in Texas. I did not know much about courting girls then, and let's be clear still don't, but I did maintain a healthy distance and was content just to have time to speak with her. I wanted to try and figure her out as there were a quite few things about her that made her remarkably different than most people I had met.

For starters, she did not use profanity or possess a southern accent. She also ate for lunch everyday a different type of "health food", that she brought from home. I can still remember her trying to explain to me that quinoa is pronounced "keenwa" not "Kwin-o-a" or clarifying that her bright green protein shake was indeed not radioactive. It was also evident to me that she was interested in other life topics that did not involve partying, drinking, drug use, or pre-marital sex like almost all the other workers there. She once asked me during one of our talks, "Where do your morals come from?". As an introspective person, it was a heavy question and one that I did not have a good answer for at the time. That one question would stick with me for months after the summer was over and was a major catalyst for me to want to look more deeply into my life and to approach learning with renewed vigor in my sophomore year in college.

The summer was about two-thirds over when Heather left for Texas to start her college semester early. The rest of summer that year was not nearly as fun without her there. I remember dropping my guard, no pun intended, after she left and began cussing around some of the other lifeguards. Noticeably, I felt her impact on me then and made it a point

to strive to be better. Eventually though, not knowing whether I would ever see her again I moved on from my summer crush. Looking back, even though I was really attracted to Heather during that summer and had a desire to be in a relationship I knew deep down that I just was not ready for one. Over the course of my life up until that point, I had been in and out of a few relationships, none of which lasting over a month. This was the case for several reasons but mainly because I was just not mature enough to be in a committed relationship to someone else. I did not know myself enough to be able to give myself to someone and I needed time to figure myself out to expose myself, to new ideas that challenged me and grow as a person. Whenever school started back in the fall, my focus shifted to my schoolwork and once again I was left to navigate the woes of young adulthood.

I began the school year as a brightly inquisitive hormone raged nineteen-year-old boy ready to begin the process of self-discovery. Up until that point my life had essentially been one linear narrative beginning from the shy nerdy kid culminating in the very passionate but ultimately fleeting competitive runner/cyclist guy. I had been that person during my first year of college and I had felt that my identity heavily relied on my ability to perform physically as an endurance athlete. Now as a sophomore in college, I really wanted to challenge myself and my concept of who I thought I was. I remember this feeling of being letdown following the close of Blue Springs for the fall. Working at Blue Springs had given me a purpose and reason to get up each day and when that was over, I found myself back in school and alone again. I specifically recall when the daylight savings time change occurred that year and how dismayed I was that the

days were about to get shorter. The early nighttime hours forced me inside more at home and saw me trying to find creative ways to spend my time. The shorter days also meant colder temperatures and it was the first time I ever remembered being sad that the leaves were falling off the trees. During all that downtime my mood turned dark in league with the weather around me and I felt myself becoming consistently depressed. All the things that I normally did to deal with stress in my life like exercising, reading, or watching TV did not appease this nagging sense that something was missing in my life. I began to think a lot about death and the concept of what happens when one dies. I remember thinking about death and the possibility of my consciousness never awakening again, that someday I will be no more and never have a chance to experience life again. Many times, I would lay in bed at night and these thoughts would consume me. I would develop goosebumps all over and shudder uncontrollably for a few moments. I was genuinely terrified. To try and confront these ideas and get my mind to a place where I could grow from these thoughts, I had to get them out of my head.

Late one night, after not being able to fall asleep with these thoughts in my head, I rummaged through the junk drawer in my dresser and pulled out a small black notebook that my mom had given me. I was never one to keep a journal before, but something was calling to me then and telling me that I needed to articulate my fears in some way. For the first time in my life, I wrote down my inner most thoughts on paper. I immediately felt better. I had codified what I was thinking and singled out the issues I was dealing with. From that moment on, I have been steadily keeping a journal, writing in it

whenever I have something that I would like to get out of my head onto paper. The following excerpt is from that first entry and was the conclusion that pacified my emotions

“What is death? I find myself sometimes troubled by this idea...that the mind will stop thinking and that my heart will stop pumping blood to my body. However, as I ponder the underlying fears that I have, I realize that it (death) is something that any and everyone currently alive must face. I am not alone in this world, but at times it feels that way. So...for now, I can put death to rest and live my life as best I can to ensure that I do all the things that I desire, to do them well...if I do so, I will have no regrets”

Early on my writings focused mainly on trying to identify why it was I felt the way I did. I was trying to process my feelings of why I was so discontented with the person I was and struggling with determining how I could develop into the person I wanted to be. The following are a few entries that reflect my personal quandary:

“...throughout middle and high school my mind was able to be calmed by a soothing bath or a walk, run or maybe an uplifting movie. However, as I entered into my college years, I became disillusioned about just who I was and who I wanted to be... I found that no amount of riding or running was the answer to the big questions in life.”

“It is said that you cannot have something for nothing. But I am not clear on what it is that I want, “that something”. Yet, I don’t feel as though I’ve done nothing. Here now, I am confused and waiting for some purpose, some answers, some true calling. Forever lives in a moment and that is something

I need to constantly remind myself of. Be the best when and where you are - hope remains.”

“I have life, I have thought, I have being. Why then do I feel lesser than what I think I am? I think money may be an issue, I suppose I want to be my own person. Also, is it just my insecurities or shyness but why does college feel so uncomfortable. Struggling with identity, in fashion, look, and hair. I know who I am on the inside and who I want to be, yet it is very difficult for me to present it on the outside or at least to feel like I present myself well. My focus now is to finish this semester with good grades and to make some good friends”

I was so full of doubt about myself because I was not sure who I was or what I stood for. I had a proclivity to existential crises at that time and just getting through each week was a massive undertaking. If I was to truly move forward, I had to learn for myself how to be me on a new level, which in large part meant unlearning all the things that I previously learned. To be genuinely honest, the first step in me beginning the process of becoming more intentional with my life choices, following my entrance into journaling, was to begin letting my hair grow long. For my whole life up to that point, I had whatever haircut my dad would give me, usually this meant some form of buzz cut. In my senior year of high school, I had toyed around with cutting my own hair, keeping it cropped short for the extra aerodynamic benefit. When I began college, I wanted to adopt a hairstyle that was cool and modern to help give me an identity. After paying twenty bucks for each haircut during that first year of college and not being entirely satisfied with them, I wanted to do something totally different. I made the decision then to not cut my hair for at

least a year. I began that small change shortly following the summer and just let it happen, as the months went by, I had to learn how to care for longer hair and come up with different ways to keep it out of my face. I began to look a little different which made it easier to begin learning other new ways of approaching life and expanding my interests. I began researching new music again, something I had not done since high school, and began delving heavily into the music of the late 70s and 80s with artists like Joe Walsh and Ronnie James Dio, and exploring the lesser-known works of Pink Floyd like *A Saucerful of Secrets*, *Ummagumma*, and *Atom Heart Mother*. When it came to athletics, I found that I greatly missed running, cycling, and working out; if for nothing else than that it would help me to regulate my mood and keep my physically fit. When I started training again, competition was the farthest thing from my mind. I worked out for myself. There was no end game or goal beyond my own ambitions just to simply be an “in shape” adult. I did not sign up for any events and adopted a non-competitive attitude. My philosophy was to go out and train on the days that I felt like it and on the days I didn’t I would submit and focus my attentions on something else. It was refreshing to train without the pressure of having to perform on a certain day. My passion for running and endurance sports quickly returned - I have never looked back.

I had a heavy course load that semester and the two main classes that stand out for me are my psychology and humanities courses. In psychology, we studied everything from Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis and Carl Yung’s collective unconscious to Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which I found to be particularly inspiring. I was

amazed while reading through Maslow's different levels: Physiological, Safety, Love & Belonging, Esteem and lastly Self-Actualization - the realization of an individual's full potential as they strive to become the best person they can be. In Maslow's theory, one's life is guided by a drive towards higher values. His perspective was enlightening and resonated deeply with me. For the first time, I noticed that life is about more than just being a fan of things and running. My sense of values began to shift, I began pursuing the concepts like having a sense of belonging, a belief structure, and strong sense of self as part of the qualities that made me...me. It was invigorating to discover from others that those were things that could and should be actively worked on as one goes about navigating their life. As I was studying how the mind worked in psychology my humanities class began blowing my mind in equally fascinating ways. Throughout the course, we followed the history of human civilization, all the while charting the progress and development of humanity's path through the context of the artwork and literature they left behind. Art and the appreciation of it began to develop a place in my life beyond twenty-first century sci-fiction stories. I was reminded of information that I had lost when I moved away from my childhood, that art has great capacity to reflect real life - not merely just a form of entertainment

As part of the class curriculum, we began a deep dive into the world of philosophy. We were tasked with reading the works of such authors like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and Marcus Aurelius. In philosophy, it was fascinating to learn from people who made it their one goal in life, to just think and come up with solutions to man's eternal questions. "What is the nature of

good and evil?”, “How does one live a good life?” “Does man have an eternal soul?” “What is our purpose in life?”. Much like in my psychology class, it was refreshing to learn about these concepts from an intellectual point of view. In Rene Descartes’ “The Principles of Philosophy”, he writes that in order to come to any level of understanding or belief one must first forget everything that they have learned that “in order to seek truth, it is necessary in the course of one’s life, to doubt, as far as possible, of all things”. I began incorporating this concept into my life to best of my abilities and adopted the tabula rasa principle. I began to look at my life as a blank slate then assess my life going forward from that moment. I would take each oncoming stimuli, situation, concept, or piece of knowledge then dissect and disseminate those incoming signals to develop my own interpretations of those things. In looking to establish a framework of reality, I hold with Descartes’ statement “Cognito Ergo Sum” (I think therefore I am).

The ability to think, reason, and establish my thoughts became the basis of my human existence. From there I began to assess all that was in my life and determine the parts about myself that I felt were good and the parts that I felt were in opposition to those things. In reading Marcus Aurelius’ “Meditations”, I sided with his own principles for what qualifies as good and bad, “the belief that there is nothing good for man which does not make him just, temperate, manly, or free; and that there is nothing bad which does not do the contrary to what has been mentioned”. Aurelius held with the notion that one should ask themselves internally regarding every decision whether it was done in respect to one’s highest principles. This was a mindset shift for me at the

time because before, I did not have any principles to which I clung to, rather I would decide as situations arose. By seeing life through the lens of pursuing the highest good that I could articulate then what remained for me in line with seeking that goal was to pursue justice in making myself and those around me better, to seek the truth, and simply enjoy life by living from moment to moment because I have no idea beyond what each day holds.

The concepts of art, religion and philosophy were all topics that I had always thought were interesting but did not know of a way of approaching them, the field was so vast I had no idea where to begin. I credit my humanities and psychology professors for giving me the means, methods, and inspiration to learn about these subjects and the opportunity to really be opened to understanding new ways of thinking. I was so inspired from my classes that I began reading additional famous historical works by notable authors like Thomas Paine, Charles Darwin, Anton Chekov, Samuel Taylor Cole, and George Washington. My college gave each student a fifteen-dollar printing allowance at the beginning of the semester, and I would use my leftover funds each semester to print off copies of books so that I could read them later and take notes on them.

Even with all the reading I was doing at the time I still had a large amount of the downtime as my classes would end at around noon every day. After getting my homework done and reading for a bit, I still had several hours of daylight to contend with. It was an exciting time for me personally as I really did begin to shed all my previous doubts and preconceptions about myself and the world around me and

started looking at things holistically. I started from the ground up and made it my mission to see if I could reinvent myself to be a more thoughtful person who had the drive and passion to keep getting better. One of my exploits in trying to learn new things and explore new pathways was to expand my fandom. Because my college class schedule would leave me with so much free time, I began looking for another activity to round out my days with. One afternoon while channel surfing, I stumbled onto the TV series Doctor Who. I still remember the first episode I ever watched. It was an episode from season five where the doctor, being played by Matt Smith, is trying to prevent this device called a Pandorica from falling into the wrong hands. I was captivated by that episode although I had no idea what was going on or who the characters were. At the time, the BBC Network played several episodes a day and I would tune in each afternoon after I got home from school. Before long, I was hooked.

During that second semester of college alone, I managed to watch over five seasons of the show. Admittedly, the show is geeky, and the Doctor character is quirky, however the storylines that were told in the show and the acting itself came off as so sincere to me which made it highly entertaining. The show helped to kickstart my imagination again after having spent so many years not thinking about fantasy stories and imaginative landscapes. Doctor Who gave me a new appreciation for life and made me begin to think deeply about time and its significance. The Doctor travels in a machine called the TARDIS which can go anywhere in time and space. The concepts that were hit upon by the show, as in how do we best use the time that is given to us, paired well with the existential crises that I was experiencing mentally.

The show likes to harp on the concept that although humans have a finite existence and have a great capacity for destruction, they also have great capacity for creating beauty and making the world a better place, both concepts I found to be compelling.

As I was continuing to “grow up” in my early college years I began to continue researching into the past, but instead of through the art and literature I began going back in time with music as well. Now I think there comes a time in everyone’s life where they go through a rebellious phase. For some, that might be the heavy metal grunge scene of the 90s, or the pop-culture craze of the 80s, 70s Disco or the sixties Peace, Love, and Music scene. The latter happened to me. I had slightly caught the vintage 70s and 80s bug in eleventh grade when I began to get into hard rock and heavy metal music. I began to grow my hair then but never to the extent to which it had grown when I was in college. In my sophomore year of college my mind was sufficiently ready to be able to fully understand the significance of the sixties and comprehend the message of “Make Peace, Not War”. It began on the heels of my musical exploration into bands like Pink Floyd, Dio, Gypsy, Buffalo, Golden Earing, the Beatles, and others. I had been researching more music from back in that era to listen to and stumbled across a film on television called *Woodstock: Three Days of Peace and Music*.

The *Woodstock* documentary film was originally released shortly after the concert was filmed and featured raw footage of concert goers, onstage performers, and the rampant drug culture of the time. The first time I saw the film I missed the opening title sequence, so when I saw Richie

Havens perform as the opening act, I had no idea what I was seeing. I remember thinking how raw his performance was and when the camera would pan out into the crowd, I just could not fathom how many people were there in attendance. It was unlike anything I had ever seen. As the film was playing, I observed bands that I had no clue even existed until then like Santana, Crosby Stills and Nash, The Who, and Jefferson Airplane to name a few. As each artist took the stage, I would go online and look them up, genuinely mesmerized by the performances that were captured nearly fifty years ago. Watching the film and seeing the reactions and interviews from the crowd I wondered how I had missed out on the knowledge of this event for so long, it seemed so gargantuan and life changing. This to me was a monumental occasion that I knew nothing about. Yet at the time there were nearly a half a million people that were there - where was this in my history classes? From then on, I went on a quest to find out about the event in every detail, quickly buying a six-disc set of the Woodstock concert on CD and researching the pop culture of the day. One thing that I was immediately struck by was that many of the songs reflected a particular message about something that was going on at the time, whether it was the Vietnam War, politics, the sexual revolution, or the riots that were happening around the country. The combination of music and messaging was powerful.

I look back on this time in my life and reflect fondly on the pivotal nature of the information I was learning and started to develop my own life arc. I had this broad knowledge of fandom to begin with from my youth, add to that a love of physical exercise and the outdoors, and now the ability and resolve to get out into the world and live life to the fullest

based off of the freedom of ideas and thought that I had been researching at the time from past philosophers like Marcus Aurelius and Aristotle to the relatively current singer-songwriter poets like Arlo Guthrie, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan. As I was taking these things in and preparing for the summer to begin, which meant a return to Blue Springs, I saw where Heather had returned home from college and was preparing to go back to work at Blue Springs as well. When I saw her smiling face from her Facebook post, I felt a wave of excitement for the summer ahead and relished the opportunity to don the red trunks, soak up some rays, and maybe look for love in the process once again.

I could never have predicted that when I began work at Blue Springs for my second year that I would forever remember it as people most often remember the summer of 1967, the “Summer of Love”. The evening before my first day of work I was shooting basketball by myself on the family court like I often did and was shooting free throws. I had this process that I did, instead of flipping a coin or asking a magic eight ball for answers I would try to make a free throw in order to answer my life questions from the simple, such as what I would have for dinner or should I run that day to deep matters of the heart asking, if I would be able to find true love one day. In my silly game, a make meant yes while a miss meant no. The last question that I asked myself before I packed it in for the night was if I would meet the love of my life at Blue Springs over the summer. And what do you know, I made it. Now I’m not necessarily a believer in fate but I do think some things are just meant to happen. I went into work the next morning with optimism that I would meet the right person for me. I felt that I had sufficiently worked on myself and was

mature enough to be able to commit to a relationship with another person.

Being back at the Springs for a second time was truly sensational. No longer a newbie guard, it was nice to feel respected by my fellow coworkers and the park visitors. The experience was made even better when Heather and I had our first conversation that summer after not talking to each other for almost a year. We sat, basking in the sun on a floating dock that stretched across the spring and exchanged notable events that had occurred to each of us over the past year. We both felt we had grown up a lot since we had last saw each other. I felt that we just clicked well together and on our breaks at work we gradually started talking more and more. In my journal at the time, I wrote:

“I think Heather thinks in a manner similar to mine. Very cool; but it just feels weird me and her...maybe it is just me being love-struck by a beautiful girl.”

While there was a fair amount of me being love-struck going on, there was more to our relationship than just physical attraction. We shared a similar approach to living our lives in the present and how we wanted to spend our lives in the future. We both held a deep respect for nature, a desire to travel, to eat healthy, to exercise habitually, and a yearning to get the most out of every single day. She was smart, funny, and was the first person outside of my family to truly accept me...for me. Although we were having great conversations during work hours, I wanted to see how she was outside of work and really get to know her. I proposed a date idea, asking her if she wanted to run with me before work one day. She agreed and in setting a date we exchanged phone numbers to

be able to communicate. Her first text to me was a flirtatious “Hello, stud muffin” while mine back was “Hello, sun angel”, a nod to her tanned honey brown skin. In choosing this as a first date, I was hoping to showcase my running abilities to her while also seeing how she responded to a physical challenge. On a pleasant summer morning with the sun just beginning to rise I arrived at the park about fifteen minutes ahead of our agreed meeting time. As I stood outside my car waiting for her arrival my mind was jostling through all sorts of ideas and scenarios; “Is this our first date?”, “Will she like me outside of work?”, “What will we talk about for an hour?”, “Will she even show up?”. My thoughts were soon eased when I received a text from her saying she would be there in a few minutes.

As she was stepped out of the car, a light plume of dust still hung in the air from when she had just, moments before, whipped her car through the empty parking lot. Her lithe form was adorned with a sporty tank-top, well-fitting jogging shorts, and trendy running shoes. She was a sight to behold. I could feel my heart immediately began to pound faster. It was just the two of us there and before we started our run, I offered that we take a few minutes to warmup and get a few stretches in. While demonstrating an exercise called a frontal leg swing, I was a bit overconfident in my flexibility (definitely trying to show off) and swung my leg too strongly forward. I overextended my reach and as I did so, my back leg had no choice but to come off the ground as well which resulted in me landing flat on my back right in front of her. I was sufficiently embarrassed but, to her credit, she played it off like no big deal - at least in front of me. We had a great time on our run, thankfully no more embarrassing moments

for me, and afterwards went for a swim at the spring. After our encounter, I was officially smitten with her, and we then began spending as much time as possible together.

A few days later we were able to meld minds even more. Oftentimes after work lifeguards and concession stand employees would stay late to play volleyball for a few hours. On this occasion after finishing volleyball; myself, Heather, and a few other friends, without anything better to do on a weeknight, decided to stay even later and sit under the pavilion to just hang out and talk. After some time talking, we drifted out to the sidewalk to lay out and gaze upon the stars. Each of us lay on our backs in a circle with our heads towards the center. After a while of stargazing some of our other friends had experienced enough of the hot stiff pavement and departed back under the pavilion. Heather and I remained there, in quiet conversation, pointing out the few stars and constellations we could identify until a set of thick clouds wafted over the sky and limit our view.

Because of our obstructed view Heather offered for us to go back to the group. In my mind, I wanted her all to myself and pointed out that even with the clouds obscuring our view there were still other interesting things to look at such as the way the moonlight created shapes from the clouds and how the various heat lightning strikes would brighten up the night sky like a bomb detonating in midair. This seemed to convince her. I was just happy to have just a few more minutes alone with her. In hindsight though, I probably should have recommended an alternative because I was being attacked by ants the whole time. However, I was not going to let a little pain spoil our conversation. A dozen ant bites later, and I

finally developed an alternative that would get me away from the ants and give us more alone time. We decided to move further away from the group and go up onto the hill overlooking the springhead, where there was another pavilion and small playground.

Up on the playground, we first went to the swing set where we were able to view the splendor of the park as it was lit up by a strike of lightning every few minutes. We laughed under the moonlight night over the fact that neither of us had been on a swing set since we were kids and took turns showing each other the proper way to dismount a swing by doing a backflip. Moments later we transitioned to a butt numbing see-saw. We stayed on the see-saw for what, at the time, seemed like minutes, but to our parents who had been trying to reach us, it was hours. All the while, we were having amazing conversations about life that made the time fly by. We both shared stories of our experiences growing up, funny events that had happened to us, and other stories of common interest. I was in a daze, hanging onto every word she was saying. I was genuinely excited and passionately dedicated to trying to find out everything I could about her. The more she regaled me with her insights the more I liked her. After those few long hours of conversation, I felt like I had known her my whole life. Our conversation was finally ended when we both realized how late it was. Once back to the pavilion we found our phones and were both greeted by several missed calls and messages from our respective families checking in on us. After a few quick calls to calm everyone down we said our goodbyes to each other and went our separate ways.

On the drive home and before I went to bed that night, all I could think about was her and how I wanted to get back to work as soon as possible so we could spend more time together. We both agreed to meet at the park early again for our following shift, which was a few days later. This time, Heather and I were joined by one of her friends and our goal was to hike some of the nature trails around the park and set up our portable Eno hammocks down by the water at one of the Mill pond's signature attractions, the Shan-gri La spring. After relaxing in our hammocks for about an hour Heather's friend had to leave early for her summer college courses which left me and Heather alone again - no complaints here. After saying goodbye to Heather's friend, instead of going back to our respective individual hammocks we both sat in one, side by side, overlooking the serene beauty of the calm water and cypress forest. As we carried on our conversation, we gradually eased closer together until finally we were just staring into one another's eyes. Then came the moment, either kiss her or not. We both leaned in and for the first time transferred our emotions through physical contact.

Our first kiss was just one little peck on the lips, but it was a wondrous feeling. From then on, we were inseparable. We spent the entire summer getting to know each other better and going on all sorts of different dates. We hiked rugged terrain, pigged out at local restaurants (Sonic Milkshakes were a staple), were dazzled by movies on the big screen, kayaked treacherous waters, swam the open ocean, ran countless miles, biked epic trails, shopped for one of kind antiques, visited historic monuments and so much more. It was a marvelous time. We did not need anything special, just being in each other's company was more than enough. Those three

months felt like a year, and I soon found myself thinking, “Was this the person that I want to spend the rest of my life with?” Up until that point I had given little thought to the concept of marriage. I never thought I could understand how one knows that they want to marry someone. As my thoughts began to become more serious on this matter, I began to draw inward and think about what my future life might look like with someone else.

. . .

A chilly wind brings me back to the present moment. I glance to my watch and realize I have been sitting outside now for almost an hour. The temperature is steadily dropping following the sunset and the cold makes me want to escape to my warm hotel room. I think about my other tasks for the evening, my mind shifting to the race. I need to study the park map as much as possible to reduce my chances of getting lost on the trail. With my thoughts settled, I roll out of the rear of my car then make the short walk back to the comfort and warmth of the hotel room. To kick off my race prep for the night, I set up my laptop on the hotel desk and pull up the email I received from the event’s race director yesterday morning. The email includes a link to the pre-race video narrated by the events race director. The video is supposed to cover everything one needs to know before starting the race. I pull out my park map and listen intently as the director outlines the race route for the 50K tomorrow. The race, as he explains, “can best be thought of by dividing it into three sections”. Good to know. As he continues, something that really stands out to me, is how he keeps reminding competitors that during the race one cannot bank time instead

that one should pick and choose their battles. I mull this over in my head. “What does he mean you can’t bank time, can’t I just run faster on certain sections and slower on other?”. I suppose this is something I am going to have to learn by experience.

After the video, I lay out all my running gear on the king size bed and ensure that I have everything in line for tomorrow. Running shirt, shorts, hydration bladder, running backpack, socks, gloves, nutrition, energy gels, and my running shoes which I had been letting air dry for the past few hours in the bathroom. The thin insoles had gotten partially soaked during my trail walk earlier in the day. I double check to ensure that all my equipment is in line then place everything neatly in the lounge chair across from the bed. On race day morning I did not want to have to think about where anything might be. I take a quick shower and prep my pre-packed dinner in the hotel microwave. To try and pass the time I turn on the hotel TV. After flipping through the channels, I discover that there is nothing that holds my interest and subsequently power on my computer once again to log onto Discovery Plus account. My family and I had recently started watching the MythBusters TV show earlier in the week. I used to watch the show growing up and enjoy it just as much today for the time and effort the MythBusters’s team takes when trying to answer and solve the litany of myths that exist in our culture. Just as I am about to fall asleep for the night, I answer a call from Heather. We excitedly chat for several minutes about the day that each of us has had. As planned, she is staying with her parents tonight so that she can have some support with our kids. I tell her that I miss them and that if I ever do an event like this again, I want us all to be

together, to which she heartily agrees. I tell her about the early start I plan on getting to my day tomorrow and she advises that I give her a call as soon as I am up to make sure I do not sleep in. I tell her that if all goes well, I expect to be home by nightfall the next day. With the final details settled, we say our goodbyes. I turn out the lights in the room to focus on some much-needed rest before the event tomorrow.

Chapter 7

A New Dawn

I awake on race day morning with multiple alarms going off, having set both of my phones (work and personal), my watch, and the hotel alarm clock to ensure that I did not miss the wakeup call. My concern was not only that I would sleep through the alarm but that my phones would revert to the central time zone. Trenton, Georgia lies just inside eastern time zone territory and my phones had been having a tough time recognizing which time zone they were in. With the alarms all chiming in unison, I launch out of bed. I feel somewhat weary after sleeping on the stiff hotel mattress and immediately begin drinking water to get my body started. I hop in the shower and let the hot water serve to get me alert and alleviate any kinks that I had woken up with. With the room still billowing from steam from the shower, I slide into my race day clothes and throw on a warm jacket to help protect me from the cold winds outside.

With a check and double check of the room, I grab my bags, place the room key on the bedside table and shut out the lights. From here on in, there would be no rest or indoor warmth until I completed my goal. Once in the car, I flip through my trusty CD case and pull out an album that I hope will give me some extra inspiration to complete the endurance challenge. The album is by folk band Tossing Copper, led by lead vocalist and multi-instrumentalist Jake Scott. The album entitled “Of Life, of Love, and Longing” is

one that my wife and I discovered on some of our first road trips together as a married couple. The album features lyrics and themes that are deeply personal to the artist but are also universally appealing to the general listener. The opening guitar strums fill my cabin speakers and help to loosen my nervously clenched stomach.

The drive to the park from the hotel is only about twenty minutes but it feels so much longer. Even though I am relatively warm in my car with the heater spewing warm air at full blast, as soon as I start the ascent up mountain road that leads to the park, my body begins to shiver. Over time, I estimate that I have competed in over one hundred and fifty different races and each one had come along with its own share of nervousness before the start line. From my experience in these races, I have learned to shut my mind off in preparation for an endurance race or physical challenge to prevent psyching myself out. On this morning though, it appears that even though I have been able to convince my mind that I am in a good place my body says otherwise. It is odd what automatic responses your body will trigger when given certain information and stimuli. For months, I have known that I was going to attempt to run thirty miles and have been steadily preparing my mind and body for this moment. On the drive now, my body is finally catching up with me. I have to white knuckle the steering wheel just to keep my hands from shaking. To offer myself a mental distraction, I set about ensuring I have my park entry fee together, all five dollars' worth, so I can easily hand the exact change amount over to the race volunteer and not hold up any fellow runners who might potentially be behind me.

In minutes, I notice the state park sign and proceed in making the sharp right turn into the state park entrance. My headlights spear ahead, lighting up the ranger station ticket box. The building, where the pleasant park attendant had greeted me just hours before, looks a lot more foreboding in the pitch black of night. I pass by the lone structure and proceed into the park. Like yesterday, I head straight for the Group Lodge building. Other than a few deer, I do not see a single sign of life within the campground until I make the last right-hand bend that leads to the Group Lodge. In the distance, I can make out some bright lights shining through the thick trees ahead. Now it gets real. I roll down my window to receive parking instructions from the race volunteer who is wielding a brightly lit glow wand, directing the slow procession of cars into the parking area. I give him my five dollars for the park entrance fee, and he admits me to the next attendant who swiftly guides me to a slot on the back corner of the parking area. I notice that I am one of the first runners here. In my rearview mirror I observe a short parade of headlights leading down the service road, it appears I had beaten bulk of the traffic. I glance at my car's dashboard clock and see that I have well over thirty minutes before the race officially kicks off. With little else to do at this point but wait, my attention focuses on the music trickling out of the speakers. I close my eyes and delve into the lyrics. A line from the song "Truth be Told" catches my ear.

"If only I could do the good, I want to do, I'd leave this place forever, and I would never turn back around just to find this old form, cause I'm broken and I'm begging for something more."

For so long in my life and what became my quest in my early college years, was to find out the truth of life. I yearned for something that I could rely on to be correct and give me sound guidance on how to live my life, not to just go by my own interpretation of what was right and wrong. I felt that philosophy had taught me to ask the right questions and pointed me in the right direction for my life, in terms of wanting pursue things that made me better. However, I still felt that I was missing something, that I did not have insight into the “full picture” of life, that is to say, clear answers to the questions “Who am I? Where am I supposed to be going? and How do I get there?”. During the same summer of love that Heather and I started dating she had been sharing more and more of her faith with me. She grew up in a Christian household and her faith was a very big part of her life. I, on the other hand, grew up as an agnostic and had very little knowledge of religion, church, or the bible.

At first, I did not want to think much of her faith. However, I eventually saw that if we were going to have a future together, I would have to come to a firm decision about whether I would commit myself to God or if I would not. A commitment to religion would mean a drastic change of my internal character and would affect my core beliefs. Religion shapes your worldview and gives you a moral blueprint for how to live your life. I did not want to passively commit to God then have to constantly wonder in the back of my mind, “Can I do this? Can I make a lifelong commitment to something that I had lived my whole life in passive objection to?”. Accepting faith, is not like, for you Florida residents,

choosing between liking the Gators or the Seminoles. Religion is a way of life.

It was fair to say that I was a religiously illiterate person, and the only way for me to really understand what was going on with respect to religion was to read “the good book” for myself. In doing so, I would be confronted with religion head on and whatever I read I knew I would then have to decide whether I would be convicted to act upon the words I was reading. So then, I set about on my journey into faith. I began reading the Bible with an open mind. I genuinely sought to answer life’s biggest questions through its pages. At the time Heather’s dad had given me one of his old bibles and so I began reading it just like a normal book. Reading the bible for the first time was a strange experience, all the stories, words, and wisdom held within its thin crisp pages was all new to me. Other than watching a few movies growing up that depicted the Moses’s Exodus story or Jesus’s betrayal and crucifixion, I had no knowledge of what the book contained. When I first started reading, I was entranced with the grand nature of the bible itself. The book begins at the beginning of time. The book of Genesis opens with an account of the start of creation and runs through a brief history of time. Never I had read such an account of history in such a matter-of-fact way. The text, although depicting the seemingly impossible in terms of how the entire universe was created, seemed plausible because there was context given for why these things were created in that the heavens, land, plants, and animal life were all established so that man would be able to thrive on earth. I was mesmerized by the concept of the Garden of Eden. I was reminded in reading about the garden of a song written by Joni Mitchell called “Woodstock”. The song was

written by Mitchell as she watched the Woodstock event unfold on television and to me encapsulated the Woodstock movement very well.

*“We are stardust,
we are golden,
and we’ve got to get ourselves
back to the garden”*

It was a fascinating idea to get “back to the garden” and let go of all of the wars, pain, and anger that the world was experiencing. Ultimately though, the movement and concept are fleeting. “But why”, I asked myself. As I continued to read on it was evident that something else was at play as I quickly discovered that the bliss that Adam and Eve experienced was cut short by their own choices due to the prevalence of an evil foe. The foe, Satan, is known around the world and through him we see that the temptation to be like God instigates the rise and prevalence of human nature. I often wondered why in the book of Genesis there are so many stories depicting the darker ambitions and flaws of humanity. Later, I concluded that these stories are presented as examples of ways to lead an improper existence. They showcase that since the beginning of time man, without the influence or guidance of a better alternative, has always eventually gravitated towards evil actions and thoughts. As I read, I began to notice and appreciate the depth of the concepts and ideas brought forth by the work as well as the practical guidelines it offers for how to live one’s life. Some of the most pivotal concepts that I encountered were the Sabbath, the Holy Days, food laws, tithing, the ten commandments, sexual immorality, and the concept and practice of faith. All these things collectively in

religious terms are referred to as “the Truth” or God’s word. Much like with philosophy, each concept I encountered I looked at from a blank slate point of view. I took in each concept, analyzing it, to see if it was true to me. I found that I could not refute the logic in the way that the bible presents that one should live their life and found myself adapting gradually to the guidance it offered.

It took me several months to gain an understanding of what I thought the purpose of the Bible was. Essentially, the Bible is an instruction manual for how to live one’s life, so that in the future one could be part of the Kingdom of God. As it relates to how this purpose shaped my life, the question of whether I could commit myself to “the truth” was immense. For me, the faith part was relatively easy to understand. Faith being, “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of which not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). All my life I had a hunger for a belief structure and wondered what it was like to believe in something larger than myself. My brief forays into philosophy had given me firm ideas and concepts of how to live one’s life as an alternative to merely just existing. The philosophies of Marcus Aurelius, Aristotle, or Plato agree that doing one’s duty and living a good life is paramount. However, to me they lacked any real all-encompassing motive of why one should do or be good, other than it is better than the alternative of evil. Aurelius surmises that “all is opinion”, meaning that at the end of the day there is no such thing as absolute truth. I had no belief structure or way to think about life that was beyond the physical realm. In my study, it did not appear out of the question to me that there could be an all-powerful creator of the universe. All things have to come from somewhere and to me the way reality is laid out in the Bible

it was logical to me. Additionally, the Bible provided answers to all of life's unanswerable questions like "Who and what we are as humans?", "What is our purpose?", and "What happens after death?". As I went through the text, I was content with the answers that I found. However, the tougher part for me with regard to religion was that to commit myself fully, that meant I had to prioritize God as the number one thing in my life. I would have to alter certain thinking patterns and behaviors that I had previously conducted. These behaviors were the things where I needed take physical action to express my faith to carry out the requests of God. Specifically, these were the customs and practices revolved around the concepts that I mentioned previously such as the food laws, the sabbath day, tithing, the Holy Days, and sexual immorality.

Perhaps the biggest commitment that the Bible presented to me from a physical standpoint was to observe the sabbath day. The sabbath day is first mentioned in the second chapter of the book of Genesis, "And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it". Here, it is initially created by God in the first week of creation and is a time set aside by God as a day of rest. Its observance is further outlined Exodus 20 Verses 8-11 which state, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work; But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work". The sabbath is a time to rest whereby no customary work is to be done. One is to focus their thoughts on God and his way of life. The sabbath was established by God for man and activities during this day are geared towards being restful, relaxing, and spiritually rejuvenating. For me, this meant not doing things that I would

normally have done to pass the time such as watching TV shows or movies, going shopping, or partaking in strenuous exercise. Rather, on the sabbath, I would attend church services (Matthew 18:20, read the Bible (Joshua 1:8), or maybe go for a relaxing walk outside (Job 37:14). This was a big deal for me as one of my favorite hobbies was to compete in sporting races on the weekends and about 90% of all those races were on Saturdays. Saturdays were also big family days for my cousins and relatives where we would try to spend time together and the day where I would usually try to do longer workouts. It took me some time to fully grasp the concept of setting aside a set day each week to rest but I quickly discovered that having a day of rest to look forward to each week was extremely uplifting. The sabbath allowed me time to consider the measure of my faith and feel that I was doing my part in observing God beyond the spiritual. Additionally, as I began to attend church services I was surprised and inspired by the brethren there. They were openly warm and welcoming to me and were all very pleasant to be around thereby shattering my preconceived notions of church attendees being pious zealots. The brethren became my second family.

Another thing that I had to commit to were certain religious dietary laws. In Leviticus 11, God instructs Moses to inform the people regarding all the types of animals that the people are allowed to eat. God outlines various “clean animals”, ones that chew the cud and have cloven hooves such as cow, deer, or lamb and only eating fish that have scales and tails. All other animals are thereby established as unclean, and for me this meant giving up pork chop, ham, shrimp, and crab among other things. These were all foods that I had formerly

enjoyed and were something that I had to consider seriously as those foods had at one point in time meant a great deal to me. A honey baked Christmas ham or fried pork bacon were both parts of my childhood. Not only would I have to choose to no longer eat these foods I would also have to endure questions and ridicule from my family and others who did eat them still. I have found that when one makes a conscious objection to something they have always done in the past it tends to have a negative effect on those people around you. I had dabbled with vegetarianism in my last year of high school so the notion of not eating pork, reptiles, or shellfish was not a hard commitment to make physically. Spiritually and mentally, I had to accept to eat this way based on faith that these items were better for me than the alternative. There have been countless studies that have shown physical evidence for why God may have commanded his people to only eat clean animals, such as the plethora of parasites that exist in pork and the dangers of improperly storing or cooking the meat or the minimal nutritional value in ingesting predacious animals. Whether or not these reasons were part of God's logic those facts only served to reinforce my faith.

Another item that I had to commit to was tithing. The bible, as I understand it, outlines a process called tithing in which one is to give ten percent of their increase (Leviticus 27:30; Deuteronomy 14:22, 28-29), for the purpose of acknowledging and honoring God. There are three separate tithes mentioned in the bible. The first tithe is where one submits ten percent of their increase to the church itself to allow it to function and enable it to continue the mission of preaching the gospel or kingdom of God to the world. Then there is the second tithe where one keeps an additional ten

percent to be able to keep the Holy Days of God and lastly the third tithe where members who have excess tithe will give to other less endowed members. The concept of tithing was a huge deal to me as that meant twenty percent of my income was now to be already spoken for. This was a tough pill to swallow as that was a large portion of funds that I would need to put aside, especially when I wasn't making very much money to begin with. However, this is where the faith element of my belief in God came into play because I had to have faith that even in taking away twenty percent of my income, I would still be okay.

I mentioned earlier that one is to keep an additional ten percent of their income to be able to keep God's Holy Days. Holy Days are the name for the God's Festivals outlined in Leviticus 23 and include Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Last Great Day. These Holy Days draw a marked distinction between the traditional holidays that are celebrated by many today such as Easter, Halloween, and Christmas that have deeper meanings which are contrary to the message of the Bible. I had been celebrating these holidays my whole life however I had never considered why it was that I personally kept these holidays until I began researching the Bible. I was not a religious person, yet I celebrated essentially the two largest religious holidays in the world in Easter and Christmas. When trying to come up with reasons for why I celebrated these holidays I realized I didn't have any; other than that, they were fun, most everyone else was participating, and they were a family tradition. After further research into the bible, it turned out that these holidays were not actually from the

bible and are steeped in other religious customs dating back thousands of years. The evidence for this can be found in a multitude of books or by doing a quick search on the internet but it was striking to me to discover these new Holy Days and to not only be told to keep them because God asked one to but that by keeping these festivals one comes to gain a better understanding of God's plan for mankind. A good example of this is the Feast of Unleavened Bread in which one is to eat unleavened bread each of the seven days. The festival was first observed in Exodus as Moses was leading the Hebrews out of Egypt. They left in such a hurry that they did not have time to complete the bread making process to let the bread rise, therefore they made the unleavened bread in haste. When observing the festival today, the meaning is twofold, one as a remembrance of how God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt and two the bread eaten each day is a powerful symbol of the removal of sin. When God returns to earth to establish his kingdom, he will remove the influence of sin i.e., the leaven. The hard part in giving these holidays up was that my family would continue to celebrate these traditions not understanding or wanting to know their meaning. I would also no longer be present at these holiday celebrations whenever my family would get together creating a wedge between my old and new identities.

The other challenge that the Holy Days posed was that when I began working full time, I had to make it clear that I could not work on Saturdays and that I had to make sure that I had sufficient leave time to be able cover being off for the various festivals. The Holy Days add up to about 10 workdays each year. This drastically reduces the amount of leave time for other personal use. With these to adversities

though regarding personal scheduling there are some unique and wonderful opportunities that the Holy Days present. As stated before, one is to set aside ten percent of their income to be able to keep the festivals which frees one from worrying how they will be able to afford to travel or pay for the costs they incur on these days. One festival where this is particularly exciting is the Feast of Tabernacles which requires people to leave their homes for the duration of the festival and live in a temporary dwelling while keeping the Feast. In Biblical times these were large movable tents however, in the modern era because of meeting availability and modern practicality this festival is held in meeting areas like campgrounds, hotels, or resorts, that can accommodate hundreds of people in one area for services. These various feast sites are scattered all around the world giving one the ability to travel to places one might never be able to afford or travel too normally.

Lastly, going through my mind and thought process about whether I could commit myself to God was the guidance the bible offered on sexual immorality. I agreed with the practice of saving oneself for marriage. I understood the rationale behind keeping the marriage a sanctified occasion and not partaking in sex outside of a marriage union, siding with the conservative idea that if one is not ready to have a child then they should not consider the act of sexual intercourse. Another aspect of sexual immorality that I had been struggling with for many years is masturbation and the use pornography. I had struggled with these issues over the years even without the influence of the bible. These activities always left me feeling guilty and depressed. The guilt I felt was shame over not having control of myself. The experiences did not have any forward benefit for me that I could realize.

Pornography was also just as detrimental to my overall health and wellness. For me, it is vitally lacking in connection between another human in an intimate relationship and detracts from the beauty of what the purpose of sex is. I had tried to understand the purpose behind feeling the pull of these activities and even sought to prove that it was an acceptable practice however, I could never find any evidence to support my case. These activities only take away from any relationship in life whether that is with oneself or someone else. In my sophomore year of college, I had made the decision to give up masturbation and pornography, which I also credit for me being able to feel more confident in myself and to be ready for an emotional connection with another person. It was reassuring to me read in the bible that these actions are wrong and the reasoning behind such notions. Matthew 5:28 or Romans 6:12 illustrate the concept of lust and that is to me what those practices represent. They do not come from any place of positivity rather they are motivated by a selfish interest for pleasure. While I know that there many who would disagree with me on these conclusions, I know that for me these are the answers that I have found to be true.

After several months of reading the bible, I had felt that I had come into an adequate understanding of the spiritual and physical requirements of being a follower of Jesus Christ, a Christian. I now had to decide whether to fully commit myself and hereafter dedicate my life to living God's way. I knew that even if I did not choose to actively follow God, I could no longer go back to being the person I was before. I had learned too much about the hypocrisies in my own life regarding what I held to be true, the potential of faith to increase my happiness and offer hope for existence beyond

this life, observed firsthand the positive benefits of being a part of a church with members who share a common belief system, and the comfort of having a spiritual language with which to communicate the enormity of my own human existence. Ultimately though, even with my strong convictions towards the church, its teachings, and Heather and I's relationship I found myself conflicted on what I should do. I did not have the maturity at that moment to affirmatively commit my life to someone and something that I had only known for a period of a few months. To try and process these feelings, I felt that I needed some space between myself and Heather. It was difficult for me to separate my longing for truth and my own love for her. I needed to parse these two things out and decipher if I truly had commitments to both or if I was just doing one because of the other. Additionally, I had been getting a lot of pressure from my family who were observing the changes in my life from religion and felt that Heather was a bad influence on me, citing that she required too much change from me. All of these factors came to a head in the first few months of my third year of college and rather than try and explain to Heather what I was going through, I abruptly ended our relationship.

Looking back, this was the worst experience of my life. My heart became an open festering wound with little hope of healing. The breakup scenario came as a response to my mind and body going into a flight or fight response and unfortunately, in a moment of panic I chose flight, seeking to run away from my problems rather than face them head on. With the absence of the physical and mental weight of being in a relationship I immediately began to feel like the loneliest person in the universe. I am sure this is nothing compared to

the torrential heartache that Heather was also going through but the feeling of utter despair began cascading into my very soul. On my drive home from visiting Heather, I had to pull over about halfway through the drive at a rest stop to catch my breath and get some fresh air. The cramped space in the car was claustrophobic to all of my guilt and despair. I did not want to even face myself. When I finally got home, I felt so bad about the whole ordeal that I could not sleep. I knew that I had drastically hurt the one person who I had really loved without any clear reason for doing so other than my own immaturity.

Over the course of the next few weeks Heather and I did not talk to each other. I had several things to sort out and make right within myself and between Heather's family before I was going to be able to move forward. There is a song by Passenger that pretty much sums up my consensus of what took place during this time. The song "Let Her Go" features the lyric "*You only know you love her when you let her go*", and for me could not have been truer. I had never had love in my life for anyone like I had experienced with Heather, and I had never lived a life where that love, once shared, was gone. Coupled with our breakup, I was still dealing with my own convictions regarding religion. During this time, I went through much self-reflection, writing, meditating, and walking until I finally knew what I had to do. The idea was concretized one afternoon when I was walking in a park that me and Heather had frequented in those first few months of dating. I remember walking up to the tree where we had carved our initials into a heart. I stood staring at those letters for several long minutes before breaking down and praying. I prayed for a long while. At first, I was anguishing myself for what I did to

Heather until eventually, after I was done with my own self-deprecation, my prayers began to shift to action. My mind became clearer, as if my prayers were being answered right then and there. I made the decision while in the forest that day that I was going to get Heather back no matter what it took and that I was going to commit myself to God. At the very moment I made this decision as if on cue, a crackle of thunder erupted from the skies. I felt then that I was on the right path, but the question still remained in my mind, “Would Heather take me back and if so, how could I make sure things would be different?”.

The first step to take along this new path to me was going to be to right things with Heather’s parents. Obviously, they had seen how bad our breakup had been on their daughter and I did not want to try and mend things with Heather without first having their blessing. It was important to me that all parties involved would be on the same page. The next morning after having made my decision, I went to Heather’s parents’ home and sat outside on the front porch and talked with her mom. Heather was away at school, so it was just me and her talking there. We talked for about an hour going over my intentions for breaking up, why I wanted to get back together, and my commitment to be a part of the church. While wary, her mother did somewhat apprehensively give me approval to reach out to Heather. We decided then also, that I would attend church services at a different area than Heather so that I could prove my convictions, that they were not just about Heather, and to allow Heather time think things over for herself. With that settled, I set about the hour drive to Heather’s school not knowing if she would even agree to see me. About halfway

there I called and arranged for us to meet and talk. When I pulled into the parking lot of our agreed upon meeting spot, an Applebee's off the interstate, I was unsure of how the night would turn out.

When we saw each other for the first time Heather's eyes met mine with an icy stare, her eyes watery from freshly cried tears. I could only imagine what she had been going through that week, especially now that I wanted to meet her. After began shown to a private booth I began talking. She just listened. I could feel her eyes staring down deep into my soul testing each of my words to make sure that I was being sincere. After I had finished my recap of events explaining all the different emotions I was going through and how I could not face them at the time she peppered me, rightfully so, with deep emotionally charged questions wanting to know to the fullest extent if I was serious and to avoid being hurt in the future. I did my best to assure her that my intentions were pure and that I just was not ready at the time of our breakup to be able to commit to our relationship because I did not know what a lasting loving relationship meant. I promised Heather then that I would always let her know how I was feeling, to always be truthful, and to try my hardest to make up to her all the pain that I had caused her.

After talking for about two hours, we left the restaurant and went for a short walk around the neighboring streets. We chatted some more about a few basic things such as school and work and soon found ourselves locked into our old bantering routine. In a moment of laughter at a memory from what seemed like ages ago we locked eyes and kissed again for the first time. When our lips touched, I felt a spark

course through my whole body and upon parting I asked her if she felt the same. She admitted she did and for me that spark meant that we were now on the right path, a path that we could forge along together. After going through this intense emotional roller coaster, I felt we were now back on solid ground; we were now both on the same page mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It was a truly enlightening feeling. I felt that from then on there was nothing that we could not handle together.

Over the course of the next 3 months, we began to reconnect on all of our previous thoughts, conversations and began to move forward in our relationship. In November of the year, I was coming up on my 21st Birthday and wanted to do something special to commemorate the occasion. I decided to take a solo camping trip to the beautiful Saint Andrews State Park, a park that held meaning to me as it was a place my family would travel to on our vacations during the summer and was great for experiencing the beach. During this trip Heather and her family had rented a beach house along the coast making it a good opportunity for us to connect and enjoy the open ocean together. On my 21st birthday Heather presented me with the incredibly thoughtful gift of a guitar. I had no idea how to play it at the time but began to practice right away and found it amazing to play along to my favorite songs.

At this point I was fully committed in my heart and mind that Heather and I were meant to be together and that following the words of the Bible were going to be paramount to how I was going to live my life going forward. With these commitments that I made in my own life; I was made happier.

However, I began to receive push back from others in my life namely my own immediate family. Now with any big life commitment that results in a change in one's behavior, if done with conviction, others around you will begin to take notice. For me, still living under my parents roof it meant that they were to witness firsthand these changes. For me the changes were simple, I would be saving ten percent of my income, reading my bible, going to church on Saturdays and not keeping the traditional holidays such as Easter, Halloween, or Christmas. In my mind these changes should have had little impact on the others around me, however I was most assuredly mistaken.

To try and explain to people that have raised you and that you have been living with for your entire life that you want to be different, to eat different foods from them, to not partake in the same holidays that you previously enjoyed, to read various books about being better, and to always go to church on Saturdays. I think my family may have viewed it as pretentiousness. In my mind, I had already proven to myself that following Christ was what I wanted to do and had already bore the emotional and spiritual weight of those decisions for myself for some time now. These decisions and actions seemed normal to me but to others, who did not necessarily understand what I was going through they only saw my changes in behavior from the outside. I have come to think that their verbal objections and negative attitudes from me choosing to become religious comes from their fear of me succumbing to their own stereotypes of how they thought "church people are" and the hypocrisy with which they had observed in their own lives. Where we lived, in the bible belt of the Southeastern United States there are churches littered

in every corner of every community and the majority of people claim to be Christians of some denomination or another. My family and I had grown up seeing these same people who were self-professed Christians going to church on Sunday or Wednesday but acting very worldly in their everyday life not displaying any signs that belief in God made any difference in their lives, yet those same people believed that they were Holy in some way. If it's one thing my family detests it is hypocrisy: people saying one thing and then doing another.

For me, I was convicted in my beliefs. However, that still could not also solve other's misinterpretations of the bible itself. One such example is regarding alcohol consumption, it is my belief that the bible does not prohibit alcohol consumption, in fact Jesus himself drank wine, and the bible gives express instructions that we are allowed to drink the fruit of the vine however we are not to drink to excess and become physically impaired or drunk 1 Timothy 3:9. At the time of my convictions, I also turned 21 and as such began to drink the occasional beer or mixed drink. My family saw this as a corruption from Heather and a hypocritical act. I wish I could have explained better then, what all was going on, but in the moment, I did not have the clarity to understand why they were upset, I just wanted to get away from having to deal with them.

Additionally, as a young adult and in my junior year of college I had been increasingly putting pressure on myself to move out of my parents' home and become my own person. This angst on my part was only made worse by the arguments I was having with my parents about the choices I was making in

regard to what I did with my money. I was putting away two tenths of my meager income as a Payless shoe clerk as part of my tithing efforts. From my parent's perspective they thought I should have been putting all of my money towards savings or bills. One day, all these issues came to a head when my parents denied me from being able to go to church on Saturdays because they thought I was wasting gas and money when I did not have to. I was fed up with all the pettiness, so I decided right on the spot that I was moving out on my own. At the time, I was in my third summer of working at Blue Springs, this time as the park manager, which meant I had good idea of what I would be doing during the day without a home to go to. However, I did not have a solid plan for what I was going to do at night. Ultimately though, I knew that I could not live under my parents roof any longer. I packed up all my possessions into my car and set off to work the next morning at the crack of dawn with no intention of ever moving back into my parents' house.

I arrived at the park several hours before anyone else and drove past the employee parking lot to the trailhead that led to the park's small network of hiking trails. I had run and biked these trails several times over the past two years and I knew of several spots that could conceal my small 10x10 camping tent that I intended to make my home for the next indeterminable number of days. I hiked through woods with my machete and backpack scouring the terrain for the perfect spot. After trekking for a solid ten minutes, I ended up in a dense patch of forest thoroughly obscured from any part of the trail and stumbled into a small clearing with open break in the canopy above me. I felt the spot was perfect and even looked forward to being able to observe the stars at night from

my campsite- maybe this could actually be kind of nice. As I set to work on my bivouac, my mind was fresh with anger and resentment. For the time being I decided to focus solely on the task at hand, of how to make it on my own. I would deal with all the complex emotions I was experiencing and family drama later. What mattered to me was being able to have the freedom to make my own choices, for better or worse. That morning I worked for good while prepping the site, clearing off branches and debris, setting up my tent, and making a light fenced in area with downed limbs to act as a protective barrier between me and any curious night critters. I tried to make the site as homey as possible for the next hour then reported to work at nine AM sharp.

During work that day, I had a lot of time to ruminate on what all I needed to do that afternoon to make my home comfortable. My work schedule at the time, as manager, saw me work Sunday through Friday from nine to six every day. Heather, worked under me as lifeguard and her schedule was during the first part of the week, Sunday through Wednesday. She was off duty during my initial move process to my temporary home at the Springs but when I called her during the day and told her what all had transpired, she was supportive of my move and saw it as an opportunity for me to grow. As soon as work was over and after everyone had left for the day, I went to Big Lots to purchase some food and provisions for my stay. I remember shopping that day and recalling from musician Neil Young's autobiography him saying that as a young kid starting out on his own, he would get so stressed out at going to the grocery store because he would stare at the aisles and see so many choices that he could not decide on what to buy. I sort of felt that same way and

chose Big Lots as my go to spot because the store was not as large as a Winn-Dixie or Wal-Mart, plus they had a variety of specialty food items. I remember talking to Heather during my first shop for food on my own and actually feeling excited that I could now live my life on my own terms. What I had lost in leaving my parents' house; comfort, security, the easy road, I had alternatively gained much more in establishing my own sense of personal freedom. I could now think, do, act and say whatever I wanted, and it was up to me to solve my own problems, develop my own philosophies, and seek after the pursuits that I lofted above all others. It was the first time in my life I was on a true walkabout journey. All of the limiting factors were now gone from my life, and it would be up to determine how I would live my life.

After getting some basic food items I hurried back to the springs to make some food before dark, I prepped my food in the park's concession stand, as manager I had all the keys. At dusk, I headed up to my tent site. I quickly got everything set up before nightfall and then closed my tent to the outside world. Suddenly, I was alone. I was able to talk with Heather some over the phone, which helped take my mind off my current situation, but she went to bed early that night, as she did most nights when we were dating. Oftentimes, we would be talking on the phone for about fifteen to twenty minutes and then all I would hear would be a light snoring noise vibrating on speakerphone. After listening to her sleep for a few minutes I hung up the phone and took in my surroundings. I suppose that I had forgotten that I was truly in a forest. I began to hear all manner of animal and insect sounds. At one point during the night, it sounded like I heard some pretty large animals, most likely deer,

walking right by my tent. To distract my mind and help me ease into sleep I pulled out my computer and set it on my small cooler, which also doubled as my only chair, and popped in a Doctor Who DVD. I watched a few episodes before finally calling it a night.

I awoke the next day with the sunrise and set about making it a good day. I gathered up my soap, shampoo, and toothbrush and headed down to the spring to take a morning bath. This was day two of my new life and it was an exciting time in some ways but also depressing in some respects because of how things were with my family and how isolated I was. The day went well overall, and that night began the sabbath. As soon as work ended, I went to visit with Heather at her house. Heather was again very supportive of my transition and saw it as a good growing opportunity for me, which I agreed with, and she provided me with some nice comfort items for my campsite such as a hotplate, lantern, and camping shovel - what a doll. During the weekend and the early part of the following week I had begun to develop a nice routine of getting up in the early morning, exercising at the park, bathing in the springs, and then working all day. In the afternoons I would make dinner and stare into the springs or down the mill pond and just think. It was in these times that I began to experience deep moments of isolation. I felt I was now my own captain but without a ship to steer.

My mom stopped by to visit me during work one afternoon and we talked for a bit. I was never really angry at her, more just angrier at myself for lacking the ability to clearly communicate everything that I was going through. Nearly in tears, she invited me to come back home. However, I knew

that if I was going to grow as a person, I needed to be away from everything that I had known. Otherwise, I would end up right back in the same place. During this time, it was the second moment in my life that I enacted the Tabula Rusa principle from Rene Descartes, once while in my sophomore year of college and now when I was discovering how to live on my own.

I do not remember how long I ended up staying in my tent, but it was long enough that my usually aloof older brother started to worry about me. He called me up and said that if I wanted to rent a room from him and his soon to be wife that there was a space for me at their rental home. After giving it a fair amount of thought, I realized my tent solution was only temporary and living with my brother and paying him rent was much better than any other option at the time. I quickly moved all of my belongings into their small guest bedroom and began my new life in Marianna. Following the close of Blue Springs for the summer I found a part-time job as a warehouse associate at a local furniture store to help pay for school and support myself. This was during the fall of 2016, and it was also a time for me when I had a good amount of free time between classes and my part time job. I began reading anything I could get my hands on and during the span of a few months read a variety of titles that ranged from novels, to non-fiction, to biographies including such works as, Herbert W. Armstrong's *Missing Dimension in Sex and Mystery of the Ages*, *Control Theory in the Classroom*, Dan Brown's *Inferno*, Neil Peart's *Traveling Music*, Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, a Neil Young biography, several of James Rollins' *Sigma Force* novels, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of Crystal Skull* and more. This was a fun time for me in my

own personal learning and development. Although I had become disillusioned with the whole college academia experience; feeling that my classes and instructors were not actually teaching me valuable things to carry into the workplace, I enjoyed finding out about new topics on my own. It was much more engaging for me to study concepts such as personal development, art, history, and human behavior as opposed to solving a complex accounting equation.

At the same time, I was also expanding my knowledge of the Bible and began keeping all of God's Holy Days. One such event that took place in the fall of that year was the annual Feast of Tabernacles. As I mentioned earlier, these festivals take place throughout the world and for the year of 2016 I had the opportunity to attend the Feast in the beautiful country of Barbados. Now for me, just getting to Barbados was producing a whole lot of firsts; first time out of the country, first plane ride, first Feast of Tabernacles. I was beyond thrilled. Traveling was something that I had always wanted to do in my life, and it was not until I met Heather that I actually began to take the leap and really focus on those things that were important to me. As it was my first feast and first time to a new Country, I tried to plan as much as I could. Getting approvals from my college professors was a bit tricky but I doubled up on all my schoolwork and took some tests ahead of time to not have to worry about school and with my part time job it was no problem to take off. This was truly an amazing time in my life because I felt things were working out.

After getting back from the Feast Heather and I settled back into our lives' and at work one day I picked up a local newspaper and read the job advertisements sections,

something I only did rarely. It just so happens that there was a position open with the County to work for the recycling department. As someone who tried to be environmentally conscious this seemed like a fun opportunity, so I immediately turned in my application and secured my first full time job with the County. While working full time during the day I went to school in the late afternoons while Heather and I spent time at night and on weekends.

We would have been dating now for over a year and half now and I was getting ready to make my move towards the next step. Marriage was not something I had considered early on in life. Sure, I saw myself there one day in some distant future but could not actually fathom how that decision or how that person would fit into my life. I always felt that I wanted to get married to my best friend in life. I felt Heather hit that mark and so much more so the logical next step to take if we wanted to build a life together was to get married. Several months later, on a perfect spring day in April, I took Heather on a long nature walk to Shang-gri la spring. We sat overlooking the clear cypress kneed water way reflecting on our journey thus far, the site of our first kiss was just thirty feet below us. All the while I was concealing a small box in my pocket just waiting for the right opportunity to present itself. I wanted us to have some privacy, however the mill pond that day seemed to have just about everyone on it. From Kayakers, to fisherman, and pontoon boaters it was almost dark before Heather, and I had the entire pond to ourselves. I then told Heather to stand at the edge of the cliff so I could take her picture. With her back to me, I set up my phone to record the whole thing then dropped down on one knee. I had thought about having this long drawn-out emotionally charged

speech, however in the moment all I could say was, “Heather...will you make me the happiest man in the world...and marry me?”. She fell into my arms saying her hands covering her mouth in elation. She said yes and we spent the entire car ride home in sheer wonderment. I feel that decisions like marriage or baptism just have a certain feeling about them when they are meant to be. If pursued earnestly, everything tends to point and encourage one in the right direction. I think Heather and I both knew that we wanted to get married, as we had talked about it a fair bit but in the end, it really came down to me not seeing any other way to live my life than one with Heather at the precipice of it. My only delay in the proposal was that I wanted to finish college first and put that chapter of my life behind me before getting married. After, I graduated in May we were then engaged in June, and subsequently married in July.

Following college, I began looking at my life in a different way. For the first time in my life, I no longer had to worry about turning in assignments, homework, or having to attend classes every week. I began to think of this time after college as the beginning of my “Life Years” in which my life was now anything that I would choose to make it. Graduating college, was not a super revelatory experience for me. I had checked out of enjoying my studies long before the end of my senior year and felt the assignments were not really preparing me for my life ahead. It felt good to know that I had committed to something and obtained my degree, which I am thankful for, but the experience was not life changing. Unlike graduation though, marriage was truly wonderful.

Chapter 8

The Crescendo

As the last song on the album fades away, I say a quick prayer. I am thankful for my ability to be here in this moment and for the love and support of my family. I step out of my car into the crisp mountain air. The temperature is resting right around fifty degrees which according to past weather patterns, is unseasonably warm. I open the trunk of my car and begin donning my running gear. I shimmy on my Ultimate Direction Marathon vest, equipped with a two-liter hydration bladder, and fasten it into place. I had pre-filled the plastic bladder the night before and am counting on its contents get me through the day with no refills. I estimate the race will take me a little over four hours to complete, giving me roughly two cups of water per hour. In my training runs leading up to the race, my longest being eighteen miles, I had never emptied out the bladder before and had not experienced any symptoms of dehydration. I take advantage of the vest's spacious storage capacity and load it down with the rest of my race day gear. Even with one banana, a granola bar, a few energy gels, my phone, and running gloves I still have plenty of room for any other items should I need to pick up something along the way. I throw on my down jacket and pants over my running clothes to keep warm and try to eat a light snack before the race begins. Munching on a Cliff bar and a satsuma that came from my tree back home, I scan my surroundings. I notice from my hatchback perch, that the

parking lot is now teeming with cars. Most rides sport colorful bumper stickers, rooftop luggage racks, or bike racks. I wager that over half of the vehicles in the parking lot are Subaru Outback's. Runners, especially ultrarunners it seems, tend to fall into a certain mold. In my own life I have personally seen how running motivated me to want to pursue other outdoor activities and sports simply by being outside and developing a curiosity for other ways to challenge myself. In general, I think runners gravitate towards a craving for adventure in all aspects of their life. In my immediate surroundings, I can easily spot five different car camping rigs that help support my conclusion. There is a mixture of camping vans, vans with converted living spaces in the back, or cars that feature a bed frame installed in the backseat and trunk area. These are my people. The entire area is abuzz with runners carrying on conversations in low tones. I hear conversations about the temperature, the drive to get to the venue, and ample talk about prior races they have competed in.

With about fifteen minutes to go before the start I double check my race vest and ensure that I have everything I need. I unhook my car key from its keychain and place it in my vest's lone zipper pocket for safe keeping. I head over to the row of port-a-lets, where a small crowd has amassed, for one last nature break. It appears we all have the same idea. I should have prepared for this. Runners always clog up bathroom facilities in the final few minutes before a race kicks off - we need to clean the pipes one last time. As the minutes tick by, I begin wondering if I will make it to the front of the line in time before the race kicks off. I distract my aching bladder by looking around at all the other runners here. Each of them has their own unique story for how they came to be

here and why they are running today. It is truly astounding how a few hundred people can share the common goal of running fifty kilometers today. Upon closer inspection, it appears to be a mature field. I see very few kids and teenagers in the crowd. Most runners appear to be in their mid-thirties and up. As I am waiting in line, a loud voice cuts through the night. It's one of the volunteers, and she lets everyone know that there is a second set of bathrooms inside the group lodge building. There is a slight confusion among the crowd, "Do we stay or go?" but within seconds the line for the port a potty's is cut in half. Already near the front, I settle in on waiting it out and am rewarded for my patience only moments later. I do my business as quickly as possible and tidy up the potty while I am in there, not wanting to be "that guy". I quickly exit the facilities after doing a wipe down of the toilet seat and picking up the discarded towels on the floor. I was never a boy scout, but I did have a copy of the boy scout manual growing up that I read incessantly, I always strive to leave a place better than I found it.

I head back to my car one last time to relieve myself of my jacket and pants that I had thrown over my race clothes. I close the trunk and lock the car door. It's time. I make the short walk back to the rear of the group lodge building where the rest of the runners are gathering. I recognize the race director from the video as he calls the meeting to order. Standing on top of the uncovered porch balcony he can look down on us competitors and his words demand our attention. "Good morning runners! I would first like to thank everyone for coming out to the race and supporting this event." He briefly covers the route and assures everyone that the race is meant to be fun. He urges people to follow the course

markers set out and explains how they will be visible. Our course is marked by pink plastic National Park Service flagging tape that will be tied to various trees and shrubs. The markers will be hanging like a streamer to be easily recognizable, even in the dark. The last item he mentions is regarding the cutoff times, he enforces double time that the cutoff times are very lenient and that it is possible to walk the entire course and complete it within the cutoff time. His goal is for everyone to finish and admonishes “If someone’s race is cut short by them getting lost on the course or going out to fast and blowing up early, it will be that person’s own fault. Don’t muck it up” – except he didn’t say muck.

With the final announcements complete he directs us over to starting line, which is the service road that we drove in on. When I get to the road, I notice that no one is near the actual starting line, rather they appear to be purposely massing about ten meters behind it. Is there something I should know? I am debating on whether or not I should go stand right by the line when the race director chimes out that slower runners should get to the back of the line while faster runners to the front. I feel that I am one of the faster runners, so I amble up to the line where I am joined by a few other runners. The last conversation I overhear before the start are two runners planning how long it will take them to finish the race, “with the topography and distance of this race the winner should come in at around four hours on paper, however last year’s times were way longer than that”. Well, it was time to find out. The starting official gathered our attention and counted us in with the classic heart pounding “runners take your mark” statement. With the word “GO!” we all set off, into the night,

down the steep hill for the first few hundred meters of the race.

The act of beginning a running race or an endurance event is one that I have experienced dozens of times in my life and each time I start one, there is a feeling that it is my opportunity to do something amazing. No matter what has come before, the workouts, the life events, or the financial considerations I know that all these things are in the past and are part of the journey that took place to get me to the starting line. The simple fact is, that I am here, and the race will be what it will be. In thinking about beginnings, in my life, I have experienced three separate occasions that were vital to getting me here, to this moment, that were the genesis of who I am today as person. Starting with my birth. Although I was not necessarily cognizant then of what was going on, I feel strongly that I was born for a reason and that there is a purpose for my life. Growing up, celebrating my birthday was an important hallmark of my childhood. As I have gotten older each birthday marks for me the inescapability of time and I enjoy taking time to reflect on the previous year and consider my life as whole. I hold to the belief that people are born with the ability to choose their fate but that we each have certain aptitudes or things that we are naturally better at than others. For me, that has come into play in my approach to running. Running and endurance sports have come naturally to me and have been things in my life that directly impact my approach to living my life.

The second great beginning in my life was in meeting my wife, Heather. When we met, I was a young boy of twenty and now I am a man of twenty-seven. Together we have

experienced countless road trips, trails hiked, mountains climbed, bikes ridden, skateboards shredded, rivers paddled, music played, books read, tears shared, endless heartfelt laughter, and so much more. All these things were ignited by the spark of our first meeting together. In our first few years of our marriage, it was a period that I look back on and refer to it as the “hungry years”. I was busy trying to get my career off the ground with the County and she was still in college working part time. There were several months during that time, between paying off her college tuition and life expenses, that I thought we would not have enough money to make ends meet but somehow, we always managed to make it. At the time, I worked in manual labor position for the county recycling department and my day would consist of sorting through various reclaimed materials, picking out the recyclable items (mainly newspaper, aluminum, cardboard, and plastic), and then baling them into large twelve-hundred-pound cube shaped bales that we would then ship out all over the country. It was physically demanding and filthy work as the recyclable materials were mixed in with all manner of household trash and debris. I remember every day getting home from work and the first thing I would do is take a shower. In seconds, the bottom of the shower would be completely covered in layers of dirt and grime that would wash off me.

The work was very repetitive and while my hands and body were busy, I would occupy my mind by listening to podcasts. While I still loved listening to music, I was struggling with wanting to become a better person and striving to be a better provider for my wife and future family. Listening to music often felt like a distraction. I actively listened to the likes

of Jordan Peterson, Sam Harris, Phil Koegan, Chris Hardwick, Stephen Crowder, Daniel Vitalis, Rich Roll, Ben Shapiro, Dax Sheppard, Ravi Zacharias, Joe Rogan and others as well as religious sermons on various self-improvement topics. Listening to podcasts was like getting a free education and I was able to get a masterclass in life lessons from all different kinds of people from a practical point of view that actually lived what they were ascribing to. During this time, I also stumbled across Dave Ramsey and subsequently took on a second job to help pay off my car loan early, pay for Heather's schooling, and give us some extra money to travel with. With that extra money we were able to afford to take a trip to Italy where we went backpacking across the country for two weeks.

About a year and half into our marriage, Heather and I began having conversations about having children. We were very happy with our relationship; it was just the two of us and God. We had experienced several amazing trips together and attended a litany of events but felt that we had more love to give beyond just our own love to each other. We had discussed the possibility of trying to expand our family in mid-2018 but I was very unsure about the prospect of being a dad. In my early twenties, I was not sure I was necessarily qualified or if I was truly ready for what I would be getting myself into. Ultimately, there were two major contributors to me finally wanting to pursue having kids. One, I had had a conversation with a good friend of mine who was then in his early forties with two kids. His two kids were both about to graduate high school and he was still, I felt to be, in his prime years. In conversation with him, he shared that him and his wife had made a conscious decision to be young parents because they

wanted to be able to play with their kids throughout their whole lives' growing up, even being able to beat them at physical challenges, and they wanted to still have a life after their kids were old enough to take care of themselves. In this process, one thing they did not count on, but I thought was a beautifully poignant point, was that they were able to grow up themselves along with their kid's development. Those sentiments all resonated with me in a positive way, and I began giving the idea some more thought. Like marriage, having kids was one of those things where no amount of preparation could really prepare you for what you would experience when the time came. Some months after this conversation I read the book entitled "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" by Robert Pirsig. In the autobiography, Pirsig takes his son on a cross country motorcycle trip to try and reconnect with his past and discover where it was his life got off track in the pursuit of the answer to a question that has baffled him for years, "What is Quality?". Throughout the book, reading about Pirsig's own struggle with discerning truth from folly was mystifying but what I connected with even more was how he healed his relationship with his son along the way. After reading the book, I thought about my own childhood and my own desires for wanting to have a son or daughter. That upon their arrival my purpose in life would be to nurture, protect, and guide that child into becoming a strong, smart, self-sufficient, and passionate about life adult. The thought was sobering. I felt I was as ready as I would ever be.

In late 2018, my wife and I decided to try and start expanding our family. Just a few months later we found out that we were pregnant. We were both very elated for the opportunity for our family to grow. However, we were both

surprised at our first ultrasound visit when the nurse casually asked us “How do you feel about two?”. I was dumbfounded. However, with nothing to compare it to either having a singleton or twins I accepted the news like any other adventure in my life “Okay, let’s do this!”. When our twins were born, Heather and I both got very little sleep in that first year. I remember one night we were both having a hard time putting the kids to bed. After about an hour of bouncing one of them in my arms I was finally able to lay them down to sleep in their crib in the wee hours of the morning. Then, I proceeded to the kitchen and made myself a bowl of ice cream to appease my sleep exhausted mind. A few minutes later Heather comes into the kitchen, after having put the other twin to sleep, grabs her own pint of ice cream and sits down beside me at the kitchen table. We sat eating our ice cream in silence for several minutes then later put them away and crawled back into bed. We were like two ships passing in the night never saying a word to each other. The next day as we rolled out of bed, I asked her, “Do you remember eating ice cream at like two in the morning last night?” to which she replies with a straight face through glassy eyes, “Yes, yes I do”. We both burst out laughing. Having children was and is a true blessing. It is cliché to say that having children is one of the best decisions you will ever make in your life however I have found that statement to be true. Raising kids is not easy, let me be clear, but it is endlessly rewarding and amazing to watch a lifeform grow up right before your very eyes.

After another year and half, Heather and I had a similar conversation about having another child and within months Heather sat me down on our front porch swing and asked me how I felt about having another child. After agreeing that it

would be great, she calmly presented me with the positive pregnancy test “Good call there, Hunter”. I should have known something was up, as the gleam from her eyes was shining bright during our entire conversation leading up to her presenting the test. Our third child was born in July of 2021 and since then our life has been a whirlwind of taking care of and providing for three kids under three years old. It has also been a time filled with genuine joy and love. What I have found that kids tend to do for my life is that they put me in the moment, one hundred percent of the time. They demand my attention, the moment I take my eyes off them or lose focus something drastic could happen or nothing at all. Having kids has taught me to be proactive and always predict what might happen next. There are days when I feel that I succeed and have done a good job as a parent and there are others where I feel shameful for the way I felt, thought, or acted around my kids. I suppose that is part of the journey. Oftentimes, people say “Wow having twins must be a lot of work or having three kids under three, how do you do it?” (The most common comment I hear about my twins is “oh man, double trouble”. My response externally is usually just to shrug off those type of comments with a polite “oh, they keep us busy” but really what I want to say is, “Taking care of my kids is not work, it’s what my wife and I signed up for when we decided to have children in the first place, sure...at times it may be difficult but I would not trade it for anything.”

Looking back, I would have never thought when I met Heater all those years ago that we would one day be a family of five together, but I am so thankful and appreciative of not only the journey we have been on so far but all of the things yet to come.

Lastly, the third beginning in my life was one that would have never expected. In late 2016, I had been attending church services for over a year and had become increasingly serious about my faith. I felt that I had so much to make up for in my life in terms of learning about the bible and God's plan for humanity that I did not want to use up any more time in my life without committing myself fully to God. That fall, I began counseling for baptism and learned more about the what the process of baptism entailed and the concept of repentance. Repentance, in short, is a reversal of thinking which changes one's life. I have covered previously in Chapter 7 the majority of things that changed in my life when I began to attend church services, however baptism was all about the spiritual and inward commitment to God. To be baptized it was vital that I repent, that is to ask for forgiveness of all my prior sins. Through baptism, a total immersion in water, the old person who I was will in effect pass away with the remission of sins as God will forgive them if I am sincere in asking for forgiveness. The person that emerges from the water is then imbued with the Holy Spirit following a laying on of hands ritual from a minister or elder. I remember my baptism ceremony clearly. In a vacant hotel swimming pool, right before being dunked under the water, the last question my pastor asked was, "Do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior?".

Even during the course of my study, that was the first time I had heard those words out loud. I paused for a moment and took a deep breath. I felt the weight of my answer throughout my entire body. My answer would be a lifelong journey to live my life not for myself only but to live my life for God. I confirmed my reply with a nod of my head and an affirmative

“Yes, I do”. Immediately, I was gently dipped into the water, fully immersed, and arose a new man endowed to now walk in the newness of life. It was a surreal feeling to truly feel that everything I had done in the past was wiped away. It felt like I had lived two lifetimes. It was now my chance to live my life again anew according to the best principles and highest good that I could achieve and picture. This good was clearly discernable as God and subsequently his word in the Holy Bible. It felt inspiring to be a part of something, to be a functioning cog in a grand system serving something beyond myself, something beyond this life.

Journal Entry - October 21, 2017

“More and More I find myself thinking just how wonderful life is. It is hard to encapsulate such a feeling. My life is so different than it was just a year ago and much different than it was say five years ago. I have accomplished my dream of moving out of my parent’s house, getting my own place, and now I have two lives made into one with my wife. Much has changed and it is easy to let life pass without appreciating what time has and will do. At times I feel myself very much older than at others, I feel like a young boy again. Additionally, a discussion of my life cannot be talked about without adding God to the picture. Religion is my life now and I would never have thought it would be that way. However, looking back now, I did always have a strange pull to being different and to wanting to be better, a searching and longing for something, to be able to submit my life to.”

Chapter 9

A Race Above Them All

Within seconds from the start, I had created a small gap between myself and the rest of the field and am rollicking down the hill away from the group lodge towards a sharp left-hand turn that leads to the entrance of the park. I notice two things immediately within the first few minutes of the run. One, my hydration pack sounds like my twins having their nightly bath time wrestling match. Each step adds to the symphony of rhythmic sloshing that is louder than even my own footsteps on the pavement. A similar occurrence had befallen me on one of my trainings runs and was occurring now because I had not emptied enough air out of the pack before putting it on. After trying to strap the pack down tighter and various ways of adjusting the bladder's position on my back I finally give in and settle in with the fact that I will have to drink some extra water at the start to get the water and air level to even out. The other thing I notice right away, as soon as I make the left hand turn away from the spotlights around the group lodge building, it that it is pitch black dark all around. The sun has not yet decided to grace the racecourse with even a sliver of its shining brilliance. There is very minimal lighting throughout the park and even as I pass by the campground the dim security lights do little to light my path on the park road. As a pickup truck slowly rounds past me, I figure maybe it is the lead car coming to guide me to the first trailhead that is about three miles further down the road.

However, it keeps on rambling past and turns out of sight, taking the path of illumination with it. For the first mile and half the only light I have is that from the other runner's headlights who are trotting behind, their positions holding steady. Taking advantage of their lights I can make out enough of the road ahead to see the middle pavement striping and do my best to run in straight line.

A few minutes later, I come upon the second of the race, where I had seen the pick-up turn moments before, and make a sharp right turn onto another park service road. This road, from the pre-race video and park map, will take me all that way to the start of the west rim trail around the canyon. From then on, the rest of the race will be almost exclusively on singletrack forest trails. When I make the turn, I lose what little light the following runners were providing and am thrust into darkness. By this time though, my eyes are well adjusted enough to the low light and the sun is just now starting to greet the day. I can see well enough on the open road to follow the route ahead. When I get to a fork in the road, I spot a few race volunteers who are standing by a sign with blinking lights emphasizing the sign's direction with the point of the arm and a gentle smile. Their smiles make me happy; it is good to see people up so early taking time out of their day to volunteer for an event like this. I smile back and give them a salute of gratitude. Making the turn, I am on the course proper, and as I enter the forest what little light, I had from the sun is vanquished. I pull out my phone and turn on its dim flashlight. My phone's light is the only thing between me tripping head over heels on some stray root or me missing my mark and going off-trail.

This first section of the trail prior to hitting the wall of the west rim of the canyon is exhilarating. I proceed for the next two miles or so to gallop over fallen limbs, sharp rocks, and shallow crevices. I try my best my best to maintain a solid pace on the uneven terrain. Already, the topography on this section of trail is vastly different from what I usually run-on back home. As I navigate my way through dense forest, out of the corner of my eye I spot some shining lights in the distance. I do several double takes between trying to comprehend what I am seeing and ensuring I don't "bust it" on the trail. Far below me, I see a sprawling network of lights. Their source, the City of Trenton. The city is ablaze with telephone poles, homes, and street signs that, from this distance and time of night, are dazzling to behold. The whole town appears silent and still, in stark contrast to my current mode of being. As I come to a clearing in the trail, I quickly realize that I am not so much looking at a clearing but rather a quarter mile wide open-faced canyon whose depths lie several hundred feet below me. My mind flashes back to the park map that I had memorized, and I know exactly where I am.

The race route follows along the edge of the canyon from here, where I had just glimpsed down into the valley to all the way down to the waterfall trail that I had walked the day before. Now, all I had to do was navigate the path down there. Running along the rim, I continually glance over to my left and enjoy the splendor of the canyon at this hour. The canyon is receiving just enough light that I can make out the other side of the rim and see to the bottom of the gulch below where the steep sandstone cliffs are peeking through a dense carpet of hardwoods and hemlocks along the canyon's edge. After observing this for a few minutes I decide I want to take a better

look at the splendor below and come to a brief stop at a fenced in lookout point. I had not planned on stopping during the race, but my heart wins out in this moment, I may never be here again or have the chance to observe the canyon this way, at night, alone, in the pre-dawn hours. I walk up to the guardrail fence and peer down below; the canyon is still asleep.

All is eerily silent until a noise breaks through the stillness. I quickly realize it is the sound of another runner behind me. With a quick scan of the trees, I can see a lone headlight spearing through the darkness. Immediately, I set off running again. For the next several minutes I can feel this person slowly gaining on me. I keep to my running pace and do not put in any speed inflections. I know that at around mile six I will be hitting the staircase section down to the waterfalls. Once there, I will be walking that portion of the run. I have no interest in taking those damp stairs at a running pace for fear of slipping or burning up too much energy early on. As I begin descending along several switchbacks, I realize I am getting close to the waterfalls trail which means, as the director mentioned in the video I watched last night, that I am about halfway complete section one of three of the overall race. As I make my way down the first staircase, I do another body check. Having eaten half a banana a few minutes earlier and drinking water about every fifteen minutes my energy levels still feel great and my body is just getting warmed up. My only point of discomfort currently is that I am sweating profusely, and I am only less than an hour in. When I get to the first waterfall, I take a quick selfie with my phone and hop back on the stairs once again heading to Hemlock Falls. On the way, I pass by the official race photographer who

apologetically regrets that he did not get to the falls sooner. It appears that Cherokee Falls is one of the official race photo stops and I hold out hope that there will be another one on the race. At least I got a selfie. I also pass by the second-place runner who appears lean and well outfitted for the task at hand sporting a name brand hat, race vest, water bottles, and calve sleeves. We give each other a verbal good morning greeting and let each other pass on by.

Feeling that I need to push the pace, I quickly hit the next two waterfalls and head out onto the Sitton's Gulch Trail. The first mile of the trail here is full of several steep downhill sections that I proceed to run down at a full sprint. In the weeks leading up the race, I had adopted a new philosophy when it came to running down hills. Instead of easing off the pace and running more on my heels, in effect putting on the brakes, I had been opening my stride, lifting my knees, and letting the force of gravity carry me down. As I zoom down a steep hill, I involuntarily let out a yell of excitement "Whoo!". Going downhill at breakneck speeds trying to navigate around large trees, a babbling brook on one side, and the treacherous rocky terrain is truly exhilarating. Each incline I go down I let out another scream of joy and I wonder if anyone else can hear me. Once past the downhill section I come to the point just after where I had turned around yesterday and head out onto a mostly flat section of trail for the next three miles. I glance down at my Garmin and my confidence is boosted when I see that I am once again running at goal pace, under eight minutes per mile. On the staircase section earlier, I had been averaging over eleven minutes per mile.

When I spot the Sitton's Gulch aid station, I take the race volunteers by surprise. As I press on towards their pop-up tent, under which is all manner of race snacks and goodies, they all shout for joy and give me kind words of encouragement. I let them know my race number for tracking purposes and tell them that I do not need any extra water or food. As I start to run past them, they kindly chime in that this is the turnaround point and that I need to go back the same way I came. "Of course!" I had forgotten about this section on the map. My brain quickly reverts to running the other direction and it takes a second for my body to respond to the dead-stop turnaround. A few minutes later and I am back at my goal pace and pass by the second-place runner who charging for the aid station. I had started counting the time since I left the turnaround point and calculated that I had put in over three minutes on him in this section following the waterfalls. As I run on, I begin to pass the rest of the field of athletes who are all heading out to the first aid station. I give each and every one of my fellow runners a casual wave or greeting of some sort.

Being the first runner though, almost all the runners tell me something to the effect of "good job" or "keep it up" before I have a chance to do the same. In my mind, even though I am leading the pack we are all here for the same mission, to finish the race. Win or lose, fast or slow, all that matters is if we can finish. Passing by the other runners gives me a lot of encouragement, especially when I hit uphill sections that I had flown down a few minutes previously. I submit to powerwalking on these hills and running on their crest and downhills. I quickly find that walking the uphill sections, because of their steepness, is just as fast as running

them and I feel no shame in doing so. Walking up a steep section, I recall the pre-race video from yesterday evening, and feel that this is part of the “pick and choose your battles moments” that the race director was referring to. My legs begin to feel quite heavy as I march up the last few hill sections and make it back to the staircases. Thankfully, the lactic acid buildup in my quads is able to drain away as I walk up the stairs towards the canyon rim once again. If this any sign for what I was to be in for the rest of the day, I was beginning to get a little worried. On the staircase ascent I take in some extra water and a half of a granola bar to keep my energy levels up.

Once out of the canyon, I hop on the West Rim Loop Trail, pass by the Main Overlook and then run southeast on a connector trail that will take me back to the Group Lodge for the completion of the first loop of the course. As I amble up another punchy climb, my phone vibrates. “Who is calling me at this hour?” I reach into my race vest and pull out my phone. I swipe right on the screen and say as a casually as possible a good morning greeting to my wife Heather. Just another day on the trail. She lets me know that she has “officially” gotten out of bed with the kids and is now making breakfast for them. I inform her that I am well over an hour in and am still in first place. I feel the excitement in her voice as she proceeds to quiz me with her typical “twenty questions”. I do my best to try and relate just what I am experiencing here. As I am talking, I hear several people cheering in the distance. I glance around and see a clearing through trees where there are several race volunteers and spectators all cheering me on. I realize that this is Group Lodge, and I am the first runner to arrive at this checkpoint. I give Heather a quick sit-rep, “People are cheering for me -

I gotta go”. I tell her that I love her and will call her back later. I stash my phone away and burst out of the trees running towards the volunteers who are manning the Group Lodge Aid Station. I once again let them know my race number and when they offer food and water let them know that I am still good with my packed provisions. I make the turnaround, another dead stop turn, pass by the finishing shoot, I will see you later pal, and head back out on the trail to complete the Bear Creek Backcountry Trail, which makes up the bulk of section two of the race.

As I plod along, I am thankful that the connector trail leading from the Group Lodge to the start of the Bear Creek trail is relatively flat. I make good time for another mile or two before coming to a sharp descent that leads down to a wide flowing stream. I recall on the park map and pre-race video this is the one part of the race that concerned me the most before beginning. The race director early on mentioned that during this crossing that “your feet will get wet, just accept it and move on”. In my race planning I toyed around with several scenarios to avoid having to wear waterlogged shoes for the second half of the race, taking my shoes off completely, wearing waterproof socks, bringing an extra pair of shoes, etc. but nothing had seemed like a practical idea. I settled on just adapting to the situation as it presented itself on race day. Before I can even see the actual crossing point of Bear Creek though, I first have to navigate a down a treacherous damp slope. “They call this a trail?” I give up any notion of running down this section of trail having to literally step-hobble over sharp rocks and slick mud. I am prevented from taking a tumble by grabbing onto various trees on the way down every few feet to slow my fall and regain my footing.

When I get to the bottom I am greeted by the gentle sound of rushing water and get my first look at the creek crossing. The creek is about twenty feet wide at the crossing point, marked by several flat smooth river rocks that have been naturally placed in a somewhat straight line from one side of the creek to the other. This appears to be the best route. The alternative is to go a few feet above the narrow land bridge and wade through the small pond, created by the bridge that is at least few feet deep. Needing to come to a decision, I think back to my childhood. Ever since I fell in a creek, trying to perform a similar creek crossing to this one on a family vacation in the Great Smokey Mountains National Park I have successively always managed to slip while crossing a stream over a natural land bridge. I swallow that history and proceed to tip toe across the rocks. The rocks have been worn smooth by the running water and this same smoothness also makes them quite slick. I can feel my shoes struggle to find footing until the full weight of my body is pressed down. I make slow progress as I amble over each rock until, with a final hop, I cover the last few feet and make it the other side of the creek with barely a drop of water on my shoes. Success!

I take the momentum of this small victory with me as I hit the opposite side of the narrow ravine. Climbing up the cliff wall, I think to myself what a crazy event this is. It is more than just running; it's full-on adventure, it's survival. My adventurous spirit is somewhat stifled when the steepness of the hill catches up with me. My legs are starting to feel a bit stiff, like the type of stiffness one gets the next day from performing a super strenuous workout the day before. That would typically not be a problem, except I was experiencing that same feeling now as I am racing. If sore muscles are just

micro tears of muscle fibers, I wonder if it is possible for me to tear so many muscle fibers that I would have to stop running. I shake away these thoughts of doubt and regain my composure, focusing on the task at hand.

The Bear Creek loop is a newly created section of trail that is essentially one giant lollipop loop that explores the middle east section of the park. The terrain is mostly flat however the scenery is totally different from the Rim Trail that I just came from. I observe an expansive landscape littered with tall slender mostly bald trees all shrouded in a dense fog that limits my visibility to just a few hundred feet all around. The contrast between the white fog and earth brown leaves on the forest floor is serenely beautiful. This beauty is only slightly diminished as I learn what the fog means for me. The dense mist has saturated the several inch thick layer of fallen leaves on this section of trail and within minutes of running through them my feet are soaked to the bone. So much for keeping my feet dry. I hear no other living thing around me as I continue running along up and down the rolling hills. Even though my pace has dropped off considerably, hovering around twelve-minute miles in the difficult terrain, I am still in first place at fourteen miles in with no signs of any chasers for the past hour. As I arrive back to the beginning of the lollipop loop, I turn right towards the trail that leads back to the creek crossing. Along this route I pass by many of the other athletes once again. Everyone looks a bit more haggard than they did when I first saw them and the obligatory keep up the good work chants come, but with a bit more exasperation than before. It appears everyone is feeling the difficulty of the terrain, but spirits are still high as each runner greets me with a smile as I pass by.

Back at the Creek Crossing, I come across a few athletes who are nervously creeping along the slick rocks to avoid taking a plunge on either side. Behind them, a few other runners decide the land bridge is not worth it and take a stab at the open water creek crossing. They hop into the near waist deep water, thereby breaking the concentration of the runners who are teetering along the natural bridge. I offer to help the runners coming across the bridge and reach out a steadying hand to assist two thankful runners across. Safely across, we part ways and I continue my own crossing, tiptoeing over the bridge once again then back up the steep climb. After several minutes of running my GPS beeps, signifying another mile down and I see that I am fifteen miles in, roughly halfway there. My time is over two and half hours. I immediately think back to my race plan - this is going to take a lot longer than I thought. As I try to wrap my brain around a new race plan I am greeted by a familiar voice, "Is this first place, perfect timing!". The race photographer has just arrived at his second photo stop of the day and is busy setting up his camera when he spots me. I give a big wave, two thumbs up, and smile for a photo before pressing on - there is a lot of ground yet to cover.

The last leg of the race is another out back lollipop loop, but this time is along the Cloudland Connector Trail. The Connector Trail joins the over twenty miles of hiking trails at the state park with the Five-Points Recreation Area. In total, this hiking trail section is over fourteen miles long. The Connector Trail was the missing link that completed a ten-year trail building project that features over sixty miles of hiking, mountain biking, and equestrian trails in the area. As I get to the next checkpoint for the last leg of the race, another

pop-up tent aid station, several race volunteers greet me with clapping and words of affirmation. For the first time, I stop and see what types of supplies they have. After checking my hydration bladder, I feel that I still have plenty of water for the remainder of the race and only grab a few food items. I down a shot of pickle juice, which I was hoping was Gatorade, a face scrunching shock, and gallop down the trail. I scarf down a granola bar and half a PB & J which help rid my mouth of the pickle taste and take a Honey gel. I wash all of this down with a few swigs of water and push on. At about 20 miles in, I am sufficiently tired now. During my first marathon in 2016, I had been running along at a sub 6 minute 45 seconds per mile pace when at this same mileage point, I hit a wall and dropped to a 7 minute 45 seconds per mile pace for the last six miles. I am feeling that same wall trying to creep up on me mentally now. I switch up my tactics and decide to run three quarters of a mile then walk a quarter mile. With this strategy I click off the next three miles well under ten-minute mile pace. The terrain here is undulating singletrack that cuts its way through a dense forest.

My watch beeps for the twenty fourth time and I take a short walking break. In the middle of taking a long sip of water I hear a hissing noise. My hand shoots around to feel my back and I realize I have misjudged my water needs. As I suck out the last air bubbles to get just a little more hydration, my mind starts to spin with various scenarios. I am out of water, I have six miles to go, I will be out of water for at least another hour. I silently scold myself for being so careless. My pace slows as I try to conserve my energy. I continue plodding along for another mile. I feel tired - not just physically but mentally. I have been alone on the trail for over four hours and the

isolation of being in the heavily canopied forest is inducing a sense of claustrophobia. I pull out my phone and make a quick call to Heather. She answers immediately. I give her a brief update letting her know that I am still in the lead but am having trouble staying motivated as I am out of water and my muscles are starting to scream for a break. She reassures me by letting me know this is what I have trained for, that these feelings of doubt are part of the experience, that I need to push through them. She brings me back to center, as she has done so many times in the past, and my resolve picks up. I think back to my training runs and my motivation for doing the race, not only for myself but for my family, loved ones, and my creator. To do something, truly, that I did not know if I could complete. An ultimate test of will power.

She stays on the line while I run another mile. As the trail opens up, it lets in a light mist of rain that begins pilfering through the trees. Having not seen a trail marker for a while, I ask Heather if she can see where I am. She excitedly shouts an affirmative and lets me know she has been tracking me on her phone via the Life 360 app. We both look at my GPS location and she assures me that I am on the right track. By her calculations I should be coming around to the turnaround point soon. As the rain starts to pick up, I let her know I need to put my phone back in my vest to prevent it from getting too wet and say a heartfelt goodbye. After running another half mile or so I realize I have not hit any sort of turnaround point. In my mind, I feel that if know when I make the turn back to the trailhead, it will help me to get a better sense of how hard I can push myself without overloading. With the rain having slacked off, I pull out my phone again and try to make out my location relative to the trail map. As I am doing so, my mind

flashes back to the Safety Tips of the park brochure, “Don’t count on cell phones to work in the wilderness” - go figure. Even still, I walk along trying to pinpoint my exact location. As I am doing so, I hear a crunch of leaves behind me. The noise is surprisingly loud amidst the quiet forest. I snap a glance behind me and see another runner bounding up the trail towards me. I take off running again as the runner closes in. We greet each other and I let the runner know that I am glad to see someone on the course as I was thinking I may have made a wrong turn. The runner is a young woman, similar in age to me, and she looks very comfortable in her stride. After a short dialogue we both agree that we are on the correct route and push forward together. A half mile or so later, I spot the sign for the turnaround point that leads back to the connector trailhead and subsequent finish line. I feel better about my overall condition and feel that I can make it to the finish without needing any additional water. On a steep hill, I charge ahead while the woman behind unhinges and takes the hike option up the hill. I pull ahead and run alone for another near mile long stretch before coming to almost a screeching halt on another sharp incline. As I look behind me, I can see the bouncing stride of the young woman coming down some switchback turns. I do my best to pick up the pace again. For the first time all day, I feel that I am racing as opposed to solely trying to finish the event. The competition serves to take my mind off the physical exertion and helps me focus on running. The terrain is tough, and each little hill forces me back to walking, my quads are starting to shut down after having gone up and down so many hills today.

As I hit mile marker twenty-seven according to my Garmin, I am doing my best to push up a small chasm when

the young woman comes up behind me. This time, instead of setting off in front I latch onto her heels and run behind her. As I try to hang on, she appears to be flying along the trail while I feel like my legs are made of lead. This is the hardest moment I have experienced in the whole race. I have run for just shy of five hours, having led the whole way. I feel that I have done too much hard work to just let the win slip by me. Everything in my life becomes just this one moment. Time slows down. My mind flashes back to every moment of difficulty in my life, all the pain I have every felt, all the hardships, frustrations, hindrances, existential crises', and failures. I feel their weight. Am I good enough? But through those trials, I found kindness, love, passion, fulfillment, and a sense of oneness with my creator. I made it through all those moments, I came out on the other side better, stronger, more of a man. I will not give up, I will not break, I can push my body past its limits here and hang on until the end, I know I can, I have too.

After a mile of following behind in her footsteps we get to another sharp incline. This one is quite long and about halfway up she breaks her stride and begins walking up the hill. I continue the course, my mind forcing my body to keep moving "arm, leg, arm, leg...dodge the root." I slip past her and push on. Within seconds my Garmin beeps, only two miles to go. I can do this. I put in what speed my legs can muster and knock out a sub nine-minute mile. After another sharp turn I run into another tight section of steep switchbacks. I have no choice; I must walk up these climbs. Halfway up the climb, I see the young woman begin the ascent below me. I once again swallow my pain and exert as much energy as I can into my arms and legs.

Within minutes, I am alone again and am wondering just how accurate my Garmin will be to the overall 50K distance. In the pre-race talk the race director mentioned that because of the hills there is no way to get an accurate GPS reading, some of the devices said twenty-nine miles while others said thirty-three. At mile twenty-nine and nearing redlining, I am hoping for somewhere closer to the former. I continue pushing on, my head scanning every gap in the trees for a sighting of the clearing that would mark the site of the Group Lodge and subsequent Race Finish. As I begin to make peace with the concept that I have a few miles to go yet, I round a sharp corner and come into a clearing.

Out in front of me, I spot the red inflatable race arch and hear cheers of exhilaration as the race organizers catch sight of me. I try to give a solid sprint for the finish line. I can only manage a slow jog. As I run up to the line, so many thoughts are filling my mind. My whole life has led me to this singular moment. Millions of tiny decisions thousands of miles ran, hundreds of hours of music listened to, marrying my soulmate, starting a family, and most importantly the discovery of my one true purpose - to live a life in pursuit of something greater than myself. Another step...I cross the line...I finish...I did it...I have won the battle!

Chapter 10

Rallentando – Post Race & Recovery

I sit with my head and arms resting on my knees; a crumpled mass of dirt, sweat, and exhaustion. I feel content to sit here forever. I hear all around me, the sentiments of congratulations from the race volunteers and spectators. I can only manage a smile and a thumbs up back to them in appreciation. As I sit, the race director walks over and shakes my hand. He offers his support and tells me that I did a great job and ran a great time. I glance to my watch - five hours and thirty-seven minutes. The single longest physical endurance challenge I have ever done. He is excited to hear how my race went, I tell him the course had some of the most spectacular scenery I have ever seen in my life and let him know that the hills were way more difficult than I was expecting, unlike anything I had ever experienced. He then asks if I have seen the second-place runner anywhere close. I tell him that we had run together for a few miles and that she was probably no more than a few minutes behind me. Within moments, the young woman bursts out from the tree line and makes her final approach to the finish line. Everyone at the finish line, including myself, claps in unison at another athlete completing the herculean challenge. After congratulating the young woman, the race director comes back over to present me with the first-place finishers plaque. As he hands it over,

he apologizes for the typo on the plaque and informs me that the printing company erroneously listed the race as the Cloudland Canyon 10K rather than 50K. He offers to have it fixed and a new one shipped to me. I brush off his offer and let him know I do not mind at all, “It will make for a better story this way!” I tell him. He laughs appreciatively at my acceptance and asks if there is anything he can get for me. He motions to the Group Lodge building, “There are all kinds of snacks and drinks inside or we can get you a beer from our sponsor Creature Comforts...”. Beer is all I need to hear. I rocket upright on two shaky legs, much to the amusement of the race volunteers. For the first time, I feel the weight of the oversized race medallion around my neck. The race director had donned it around me when I first went over the finish line. I had not noticed it until now. It is a beautiful medal, deeply carved, inset with canyon imagery, vibrant colors, and a four-inch-wide neckband. Worthy of the “Race Above Them All” tagline.

As I walk over to the pop-up tent, already the volunteers from Creatures Comforts Brewing Company are whipping up a pint. They hand me a full cup of beer in a commemorative race glass featuring the race organizer’s logo on one side and the park’s insignia on the other. I take a long swig, dispelling any of my concerns regarding dehydration, and enjoy the hops. The cold liquid is refreshing after such an intense ordeal. I thank them for the pint and walk off back to my car for some privacy. As I hobble over to my car, I whip out my phone, too tired to talk, and take a quick selfie with my race swag and send it along to Heather so that she knows I am okay. I let her know I will call her soon, first I need to sit and drink some water. Once back to my car, I sit in my exposed

trunk. My body is so stiff. It takes several minutes before I get enough energy to start removing my race gear. Ever so carefully, I strip off my race vest and work on removing my shoes and socks which feel as though they have become fused to my water-soaked feet. The soles of my feet have taken a great beating out on the hard rock surfaces of the trails and now as my race energy fades the pain and soreness begins to enter in. With my shoes finally off, I am afraid to see what my feet look like after so many hours of compounding friction. I pull off my race socks inch by inch until I uncover my feet. Two thoroughly drenched and pruned extremities. As I wiggle my toes, feeling pulsates back into my feet. I sit with my back leaned up against the trunk face for several minutes and keep my feet exposed to the chilly air to dry off while my upper body is wrapped in a down jacket trying to elevate my core body temperature. A bit calmer now, I give my wife a much-anticipated call. She is flabbergasted that I won the race and expresses how proud she is of me. It was truly a difficult experience that I know I could not have completed without her support. I tell her that I plan on hanging around the venue for a few more minutes to grab some snacks and chat with the other runners and then I will be heading back home. I let her know that I should be home a little after dark depending on traffic.

With her blessing, I sign off and slip on a pair of warm socks over my swollen feet then slide into Xero shoe sandals before making my way over to the Group Lodge. When I step inside, I am greeted by a warm rush of air - I could stay here for a long time. The older woman who gave me my race number the day before is here and offers her congratulations on my finish and points out all the race day goodies they are

serving up. Upon seeing the food, I realize how upset my stomach is and oblige her kind offer by taking some Ginger Ale soda. I have not had soda in years, but it feels right in the moment. The smooth room temperature carbonation feels good to my stomach and helps to calm my slightly shivering body. I stay in the room for several minutes and I am soon joined by other finishers of the race. We talk about the day, the course, the conditions, and exchange where each of us calls home. We all have come from vastly different parts of the country, yet we have all made it here. It feels good to be a part of something this big. Having warmed up enough to brave the elements outside, I head back to the finish line to see if I can catch a few other runners as they come across the finish. Once there, I am greeted by the young woman whom I ran part of the race with. She is joined by her family, and we talk about the race and our back-and-forth battle on the course. She mentions that she appreciates me being there on the course as I helped to push her past her limits of what she thought she was capable of. I echo her sentiments back to her and congratulate her on a great run.

As I stand around the finish line, I am rewarded by several different finishers coming across the line, it is amazing to live vicariously through all these people as they finish such a remarkable endeavor. I observe several runners achieve their epic finish and each one crosses the line a little differently either jumping for joy, crumpling to the ground, bursting out in tears, or simply by walking over the finish line triumphantly with their arms held high. Either way, they are all winners today. As I enjoy these various spectacles, an arm taps me on the shoulder, I recognize the person from earlier as one of the race day volunteers who was inside the lodge just a few

minutes ago, “Hey, we almost forgot to tell you, for coming in first place you get your choice of a free Hoodie or T-shirt”. Awesome! I let him know that a hoodie would be great and in short order he presents me with a medium sized black hoodie outfitted with the race logo plastered on the front. This day just keeps getting better. I had held off on buying any extra race day swag when I signed up for the event because of how pricey everything was and admittedly I was a little bummed when I had seen everyone else wearing their gear. Immediately, I strip off my jacket and pull the hoodie on, it fits perfectly- now I look the part. After watching a few more runners come across the line I glance to my watch and realize that if I want to stick to my schedule I had probably better get going. With a silent nod of appreciation to the race and the park itself I turn my weary body around to make the short walk to my car and slide in the front seat. I sit for a few moments to collect myself and catch a glimpse of my reflection in my car’s rearview mirror. My pupils appear as mere specks amidst deep raw amber colored eyes. For what seems like the first time in my life I observe deep set lines on my face. “Where did those come from?” Maybe it is just me, but suddenly I feel older. “Has this race fundamentally changed me somehow?”. Maybe I sweated so much in the race that I have flushed out any impurities that were in my body, the race itself acting as one long baptism of experience.

With my cars engine and heater still warming up the main cabin, I slowly exit the parking area and hop on the park road that leads to the exit. The race may be over, but I still have a long drive ahead of me. When I get to the park exit, I look right and left. A right will take me back to the interstate where I came from in the morning while a left will take me on

country backroads for a few hours before hitting another major state highway. My GPS says that both routes are relatively the same in terms of time and distance. As I have just completed something new, I decide to stick with the trend and side with taking a left to head out onto roads unexplored. As I begin to get up to highway speeds, I look over once again to my front passenger seat and grab my CD case. In keeping with the theme of newness I have been saving two albums for the drive home that have been released in the year 2021. Neither of which I have heard yet. I slip out the first album and pop it into the disc drive. The album is Ed Sheeran's latest work called "Equals". From my research, the record is supposed to be his coming-of-age album that sees him explore growing older and fatherhood. At this point in my life and considering what I have just went through I cannot think of a better sound I would like to hear. Ed Sheeran's music also holds a special place in my heart as his song "Perfect" was the song Heather and I danced to at our wedding. "Tides" is the opening track, and it leads with bouncing drums, guitar, and vocals. The sound is captivating, smooth but edgy, and my head is instantly bobbing along with the beat. As the vocals cut across the stereo my eyes glass over, and I swallow a lump in my throat as the songwriters' lyrics are deeply resonating.

*"I have grown up, I am a father now
Everything has changed, but I am still the same somehow
You know, I've never been afraid of death
But now I wanna see the things that haven't happened yet"*

I stare ahead of me at the open highway. Being a father is a truly incredible experience, one that I cannot begin to fully comprehend in my mind, let alone in words. I was able to be

present for all my children's entrances into the world. Each time I was a tender ball of fear, pride, panic, and elation. Now that Heather and I are parents of three, I feel that we have gotten into a good groove when it comes to keeping the kids on a routine. However, oftentimes throughout a typical week there are moments where I question if I am doing my best. Raising kids challenges me each day and I strive to give my family the best version of myself that I can manage. When I leave to go to work each morning, I feel a twinge of regret and sadness at having to leave my family for the day. However, when I get back home, I am greeted by my wife and three smiling kids who are all thrilled to see me. It seems like they are getting bigger every day and much like Ed Sheeran's song, it has been wonderful to see them grow up this far. I am looking forward to seeing the men they will become one day. I do believe that having kids does change a person, on many levels. I now have a whole list of things that I never thought I would think about and skills I did not know I could possess - like what happens when a diaper gets tossed into a washing machine or how to go the bathroom while supporting a child in each hand. Mostly though, I do feel that I am the same person that I was before I had kids but that I am being made better because they are in my life. My kids force me to live in the present moment, I must be one hundred percent present with them to be able to teach, love, and encourage them to grow to be strong healthy children. When I am not on my game, my children and wife can see that.

As the music plays on, I begin to get a sense for the overall theme of the album. It strikes me that the artist is going through a similar phase in life to me. A sort of take stock, evaluate, and appreciate phase to understand the most

important things in one's life. The third track, "First Times", centers around Sheeran's recollection of achieving his biggest career goal, playing at Wembley stadium, as opposed to the time when he asked his wife to marry him, the latter being the more meaningful experience,

*"Ain't it funny how the simplest things in life can make a man
Little moments that pass us by
Oh, but I remember"*

By going through my own past and holding on to the positive experiences, I can take those memories and experiences with me to help navigate my present life, keeping a nod towards the future. I feel that it is important to frequently take stock of one's own life as it is easy to get off track. By having an eye to the past and a vision of the future I can focus on optimizing my life for the better now. The album makes for great listening on the open highway and its light and energetic tone makes the miles fly by. An hour or so later and I arrive to Interstate 75 and drive for a few miles before making a fuel stop at a typical interstate exit. I settle between the myriad of gas stations by homing in on the most convenient for me, the closest one to the interstate on the right side of the road. As I step out to make the short walk around my car to the passenger side gas cap, my feet are aching with every step. As the blood begins to circulate through my body my feet begin to feel better. Shifting my attention to the air outside, bitterly cold winds whip through the pumping station. My new hoodie protects my chest and arms from the cold but does little to protect my exposed face and legs from the elements. My calves and quads sprout goosebumps from the temperature differential. I glance around my surroundings

and see a yellow and red sign that catches my eye marking a Wendy's restaurant that is built into the gas station here. The thought of some hot chili and the idea of rewarding myself with some fast food outweighs my resolve to focus on healthy eating choices. "Cheat meals are acceptable every now and then", I tell myself. I procure a small bounty of burgers, fries, and chili from the salt and fat broker and head off down the road again with my sights set for home. As I munch on a few bites, I remove "Equals" from the CD player and insert my last "new" album for the trip.

The album is the latest release from rock band Greta Van Fleet. Having discovered them a few years ago, I have been following their career with great interest as they are reinvigorating modern rock 'n roll by bringing back clean sounding guitar, bass, and drums. With imaginative lyrical landscapes, screaming guitar solos, and a genuine love for playing music the band inspires me today. They are taking concepts of old, having a similar sound to Led Zeppelin or Rush, and are making it their own in new and exciting ways - something a former rock aficionado like myself greatly appreciates. The ethereal sounds of the opening track "Heat Above" filter through my car's speakers at max volume. When the groove kicks off in earnest my whole body is rocking along with the beat, I imagine I present a comical appearance to any other cars that pass by me on the interstate. When the soaring vocals of Joshua Kiszka careen into my auditory receptors I am blown away by his range and lyrical delivery. His style is totally unique and a bit quirky which, as a lifelong Rush fan, I totally enjoy. I listen to the entire album on the drive and its high energy feel carries me along the highway for a long stretch of blacktop. When the album ends,

I decide to turn off the incoming noise for a while and listen to the sounds of the drive. I am in the lower parts of Georgia now, surrounded by beautiful open terrain replete with undulating hills and expansive valleys. Soon, my GPS reads that I have just another hour to go on my drive. The sun is beginning to set as I steam along. I do my best to take in the silence amidst the peaceful scenery - this has been a great trip.

Chapter 11

The Way Forward

When I see my family for the first time, I feel a blanket of relief wash over me - it feels good to be back. I give my wife and kids a big hug and indulge in a few minutes of play time with the twins. After a couple of bouts running around the house they are soon occupied playing with their toys, allowing Heather and I to catch up. I try to relate all my experiences to her as best I can. She excitedly grills with me with fun questions about the race like, what type of people were at the race, how tired was I during the event, if I could feel my legs now, and most importantly did I enjoy the experience? While I feel I cannot fully comprehend the depths of what the race has done for me just now, I do my best at articulating the event's atmosphere, the conditions, and how tired I was. I also present her with a few gifts that I had picked up at the State Park Gift shop on my way out. A necklace, with the Cloudland Canyon State Park logo imprinted into a metal locket, and a few bumper stickers - a personal favorite of hers.

At night, I lay my head down to rest. Though tired, my mind is still too awake to fall asleep right away. My mind races as I think about the trip and its greater context. Now, at 27 years old. I feel the weight of time more and more. My mind reflects backwards. When I turned 25, a thought crossed my mind then that I had lived a quarter of my life. This epiphany triggered me to embark on a journey of cataloging my life into words. In that process, I began collecting a multitude of stories

and ideas that centered around the most memorable moments in my life in the hopes that one day I could write a book about them. Now, I am at an intersection of all those moments. I have gone through my life's past but have also accomplished something I never dreamed would be possible, I finished an ultramarathon. I want to use this success and experience that I have been through and channel it for the good; to utilize my past as inspiration and courage to be able to go out into the world and be a better person. I think about how just running an ultramarathon can carry weight in other aspects of my life, not merely running just as a physical victory.

In my professional life, I work in local government. I am usually the youngest person in the room at all the meetings that I attend. I have been told several times that I am good at what I do but still have a lot of experience to gain or that I am the young gun or rising star. While it is nice to hear these sentiments I do long for a time when I can just be what I am supposed to be in a professional sense. It may be just me, but in turning twenty-seven I have noticed a shift in my own thought processes, and I do feel that my brain is slowly becoming more patient - maybe wiser if I can be so bold. In my life, it has felt, thankfully so, like a successful ascension towards better things. My achievements appear to be getting bigger on a much grander scale personally and professionally. Now that I am in the period of my life in which many would consider to be the peak prime years of one's life it has me wondering what else this life holds for me. At the same time, on the flip side of this excitement, I look around and see the world today and I am at times stricken with terror by the world that I live in and the people that live in it. Around me, wars rage in other nations incessantly, poverty and civil unrest

abound, and all signs point to a world that is being degraded by mankind itself. While this is unnerving, I remain optimistic for mankind and hold onto hope for what we could be and what we could achieve. Much like Optimus Prime's sentiments in the film *Transformers*, I have seen observed mankind's capacity for evil and destruction but have also seen our great capacity kindness and love. I sometimes feel that my own hopefulness for humanity represents a minority of the population. In completing the ultramarathon, it has served reinvigorate my hope for the future. Hundreds of people, from all other the world decided to come out and participate in a thirty plus mile run, not because they had to or were forced to, but because they wanted to. They wanted to challenge their mind and body in the same way that I wanted to challenge myself. If there are always people like that who exist in the world, who live to dream and ask what is truly possible, then I hold onto a strong sense of hope for what we can do together.

In a book that I read recently by Dr. Jordan B. Peterson entitled *12 Rules for Life*, rule number 2 states that one should first take care of themselves before taking care of others. Meaning that to better help others we first need to ensure that we are able to do so being physically healthy and assuring that our mind is in a good place. When one does this, they can then ethically take care of other individuals and their surroundings. When I read that chapter for the first time I was inspired by the words as they resonated with my own thought process. I want to be available for everyone I meet, emotionally and mentally. For me, that can only happen when I am at one with myself and my creator. If I falter from my God, I lose myself and thus lose touch with reality. As I close

my eyes for the night, I focus in on a final thought for the future. I will continue to work on improving myself in that hope that I can expand my outreach and positive influence into the world as far as possible. In doing so hopefully that will make some small manner of improvement upon the world before my own torch of life is snuffed.

Epilogue

It is said that of anyone who is trying to get somewhere in life they must first know where they came from and where they are trying to go. For many, this is a great mystery as they never find out what they are striving for. At least for me, I think I have found my own answers and the words of this book are the story of my striving as I have sought to unravel that quandary. I am now a few days removed from the race. My legs are still sore, but I find myself once again at the local park trying to get a run in. Slogging down a narrow singletrack trail, I can barely keep up a 10-minute mile pace.

My legs are swollen, tender, and strain painfully with every step. Yet, I yearn to run. I make it about a mile before needing to take a break to stretch out my legs. It is only Tuesday in the week but feels like so much later. I stop and pause for a moment when I come to a clearing on the trail. I breathe in deeply and close my eyes. I am determined more than ever not to fall into the same old routines, to chart my own course apart from the rat race cycle that humanity has created. I want to live my life full of play and invention, energy and intensity, humor, and intelligence. I desire to use my experience as an ultramarathoner as kindling for my own personal fire to keep me motivated to be, act, and feel better. Speaking in a low voice, I begin to relate these sentiments out loud, a prayer of thankfulness to my God.

Moments later, a light downpour of rain blankets the forest, forcing me to make a run for it back to my warm dry

car. I find the energy to run, if albeit barely, and make it back to my car without incident. Back in the car, I think about how I was just here, in the driver seat, a few days ago. Then, I was listening to music in the dark, about to take on a challenge that I knew would change me. I know that I am still me, the same person who has been through all these things before, but I feel different now. Like, in some way I looked down deep into my soul and was at peace with the person I was and am but also saw that I could be so much more and that because of my experience out on the trail I now possess the will to do so.

With that thought pushing me forward, I put my car in drive, pop in an album into the disc drive and crank up the volume. Some things stay the same, some things are different. All I know for sure is that I want to be the best husband, father, athlete, and Christian that I can be in whatever form that takes. I know that if I earnestly pursue these aims to the best of my abilities, then at the end of my days, I can proudly say that I have truly lived an "Ultra Life".

Notes

What was in the case?

For the curious reader who is interested in knowing what albums I brought along with me on the trip, check out the list below. Of the roughly 120 albums that I own, I chose a select few to be my travel companions for the “Ultra Trip”. I tried not to pick more than one album per artist, excluding Rush of course. Thusly, I brought along a lot of artist’s greatest hits titles. These albums make up the soundtrack of my life so far in one way or another.

38 Special	The Millennium Collection
Alice Cooper	School's Out
Bad Company	10 from 6
Bee Gees	The Ultimate Collection
Billy Idol	Vital Idol
Black Sabbath	Greatest Hits 1970-1978
Bon Jovi	Slippery When Wet
Boston	Greatest Hits
Carole King	Tapestry
City and Colour	Bring Me Your Love
Coldplay	A Rush of Blood to the Head
Dave Mason	Alone Together
Def Leppard	Pyromania
Dio	Holy Diver
Ed Sheeran	Equals
Elvis Presley	King Creole
Foo Fighters	Echoes, Silence, Patience & Grace
Foreigner	The Very Best & Beyond

Greta Van Fleet	The Battle at Gardens Gate
Guns N Roses	Greatest Hits
Hall and Oates	The Very Best of
Iron Maiden	Somewhere Back in Time
James Bay	Chaos and the Calm
Jefferson Airplane	Volunteers
Joe Walsh	But Seriously Folks
John Williams	Star Wars Episode IV - A New Hope
John Williams	Greatest Hits 1969-1999
Journey	Escape
Kansas	The 70s
Kiss	Destroyer
Megadeth	Countdown to Extinction
Men at Work	The 80s
Mountain	Climbing
Mumford & Sons	Sigh No More
Nazareth	Hair of the Dog
Pat Benatar	10 Great Songs
Pink Floyd	Echoes
Queen	Greatest Hits
Quiet Riot	The Very Best of:
Rush	Moving Pictures
Rush	Retrospective
Rush	Counterparts
Savoy Brown	Looking In
Scorpions	The Millennium Collection
Styx	Greatest Hits
Survivor	Super Hits
Tesla	Mechanical Resonance
The Beatles	Abbey Road
The James Gang	Yer Album
Toby Keith	Shoogn' Y'all
Tossing Copper	Of Life, of Love, and Longing
Uriah Heep	Icon

Van Halen	Van Halen I
Whitesnake	Whitesnake
Wishbone Ash	Argus
Woodstock	50 Years On